Remaking the Political in Fortress Europe: Political Practice and Cultural Citizenship in Italian Social Centers

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REMAKING THE POLITICAL IN FORTRESS EUROPE: POLITICAL PRACTICE AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP IN ITALIAN SOCIAL CENTERS

A Dissertation Presented

by

ANGELINA I. ZONTINE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Anthropology
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for support the forms and extent of which I could not begin to quantify but which has pulled me back from “the edge” again and again. Grazie infinite e per sempre.
ABSTRACT

REMAKING THE POLITICAL IN FORTRESS EUROPE: POLITICAL PRACTICE
AND CULTURAL CITIZENSHIP IN ITALIAN SOCIAL CENTERS

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At the current moment, with voter turnout low and mass popular uprisings re-
 fashioned the political map, questions of political participation and dissent are extremely
pressing. In established democracies and newly democratized states alike, an active and
potentially dissenting citizenry is often seen as the necessary balance to overreaching
state power and unregulated market forces, but scholars struggle to keep abreast of a
proliferation of new foci and forms of engagement. This dissertation focuses on the form
of collective political engagement enacted at centri sociali occupati autogestiti (occupied,
self-managed social centers) or CSOA in Bologna, Italy. As they enact political
alternatives through everyday practices of self-management and cultural production,
social center participants complicate conventional analytical distinctions between
revolution and reform or between individual transformation and larger social change.
Through participant observation at three specific centers, interviews with participants and
visitors and discourse analysis of recent legislation and policy, the investigator explores
the character of social center participants’ cultural and political practice, internal organization and decision-making processes, and the heated conflict surrounding social centers in order to discern the opportunities afforded and tensions generated by this form of political engagement. The author argues that CSOA participants experience a form of belonging constructed on the basis of participation rather than ascribed statuses or adherence to shared ideological positions. Furthermore, participants seek to establish an autonomous space wherein key obstacles to participation have been deliberately dismantled or drained of authority in order to render this form of belonging more inclusive. In the shadow of post-9/11 securitization processes at the supra-national, national and local levels aimed at governing migrant mobility and public expressions of dissent, CSOA participants seek to displace the ethnic, religious, linguistic, generational and class-specific norms that define the cultural dimensions of contemporary Italian citizenship. Drawing on the concept of cultural citizenship, the author therefore argues that the political imaginary proposed by CSOA participants represents a deliberate contestation of both the authority and function of state-based citizenship models and can be understood as new model of citizenship characterized by an alternative, less exclusive relationship between belonging and participation.
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GLOSSARY OF ITALIAN TERMS AND ENTITIES REFERENCED IN THE DISSERTATION

**Alleanza Nazionale** (AN). National Alliance. Right national party established in 1994 to include elements of the defunct party **Movimento Sociale Italiano-Destra Nazionale**. (No longer existent).

**Arma dei Carabinieri**, commonly called simply **Carabinieri**. One of the four divisions of the Italian armed forces, answerable to the **Ministero della Difesa** (Ministry of Defense) and tasked with national public security (the other three divisions are the Army, Navy and Air Force).

**Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani** (ANCI). National Association of Italian Municipalities. The association that unites and represents Italian municipalities at the national level.

**Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d’ Italia** (ANPI). National Association of Italian Partisans

**Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana** (ARCI). Italian Recreational and Cultural Association

**Assessore**. A member of the town/city council with a defined role and mandate, such as “councilor for tourism,” “councilor for youth policies,” “councilor for urban planning and development,” etc. The mayor appoints individuals to this position, choosing among directly elected councilors, to form his or her **Giunta comunale**, which could be likened to a municipal cabinet.

**Casa delle Libertà** (CdL). House of Liberty. A political coalition established in 2001 to bring together multiple center-Right national parties. (No longer existent).

**Centro di permanenza temporanea** (CPT). Temporary stay center. Since 2008, this type of structure has been known instead as a **Centro di identificazione ed espulsione** (CIE) or Identification and expulsion center.

**Circolo**. A post-war type of civic, cultural, recreational and/or political club or association, commonly supported and managed by the local branch of a national political party.

**Conferenza dei Presidenti di Regione e di Provincia autonoma**. Presidents of Regions and Autonomous Provinces Conference, sometimes shortened as **Conferenza delle Regioni** (Conference of the Regions).
Consiglio comunale. Town/city council, formed through direct election. The number of posts is proportionate to the population of the city or town.

Consigliere comunale. Member of the town/city council.

Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali (DIGOS). General Investigations and Special Operations Division, a department of the Polizia di Stato (State Police) locally managed by the provincial Questura and tasked with investigation and information-gathering about phenomena and activity that threaten to subvert the democratic order.

Ente Nazionale Assistenza Lavoratori (ENAL). National Worker’s Assistance Agency. After WWII, took the place of the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro in managing the country’s many employee-based recreational and social clubs and associations on behalf of the state.

Guardia della Finanza. Financial Guard, a division of the Italian military police forces in charge of financial crime, counterfeiting and the drug trade. Could be likened to the Finance and Customs police.

Istituto per gli studi sulla pubblica opinione (ISPO). Institute for studies of public opinion, a private public opinion surveying company.

Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT). National Institute of Statistics, the Italian state’s primary statistical data collection and reporting organ.


Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND). National After-work Institution, founded in 1925 by the Fascist state to manage the many worker’s leisure-time clubs and associations established and co-opted by the state.


Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (PRC), often known as Rifondazione Comunista. Far-Left party established in 1991 following the breakup of the Partito Comunista Italiano.

Polizia di Stato. The national police force assigned to the Ministero dell'interno (Ministry of the Interior), to be used at the national level to manage public security and maintain public order.


Questura. The local office of the Polizia di Stato at the provincial level.

Rilevazione dei fenomeni di degrado urbano (RILFEDEUR). Survey of urban blight phenomena. An information-gathering project established as part of the urban security policy of the region of Emilia-Romagna.

Unione delle Province d'Italia (UPI). Union of Italian Provinces. The association that unites and represents the Italian provinces at the national level.
CHAPTER 1

AN INTRODUCTION TO MY APPROACH, OBJECT AND PRIMARY ARGUMENT

In October of 2008, a few months after settling in Bologna to conduct the ethnographic research that underlies this dissertation, I passed through the city’s main square, Piazza Maggiore, on my way to the post office. It was mid-morning and the piazza was alive with activity, from itinerant Bangladeshi and Senegalese vendors hawking their wares and young professionals passing through with leather briefcases in hand to groups of elderly men, gathered in loose circular formations, chatting and watching the passersby. One circle of people, however, stood out. They were a mixed lot, and focused intently on something happening inside the circle. At first I thought it must be a street performer, but as I drew close I realized it was only a nondescript older man with windblown white hair standing on a little plastic stepstool to address the gathered crowd.

The speaker, who I later learned was a philosophy professor at the University of Bologna who organized this soapbox project regularly throughout the year, exhorted the listeners to make themselves heard. “Anyone can come up here and speak,” he told us, “but we have to be polite and civil with each other. Always use polite language and modes of address and don’t interrupt; only the person up here speaks, until he is done. Who’s next?” he stepped down, and after a moment’s hesitation his place was taken by a man in his mid-thirties who began to express his frustrations with the political
environment in Italy and the countless privileges politicians enjoy while common people are left to foot the bill. The next man, who appeared to be in his mid-50s, talked about the country’s economic problems, from stagnation to unemployment, and his perception that the government was not working in any effective or perceptible way to address these issues. They would only get worse, he argued, and no one is doing anything.

People drifted up and away; at one point there were more than 80 people, at another point only 15 or 20. Up on the stepstool, people spoke about local and national politics, agreed or disagreed about the roots of the problem and what should be done. One young man, dressed like a student, said that he felt embarrassed by those who were supposedly representing him: “We let ourselves be led by these incompetent fools, who go on TV and don’t even know how to speak [properly], they don’t even use the subjunctive [grammatical form].” One older man in a smart business suit got up to defend the local administration, saying that they lacked the resources to really do all the good they wanted to; an angry older man in a shabby jacket and work boots got up to reply that his grandmother raised four children on a pittance and if she could figure out how to do less with more, so should they. The next man, middle aged, spoke up in agreement: “The politicians are our employees,” he asserted. “We have to demand what we want, not be passive and just put up with things.”

The crowd murmured in agreement, but no one who spoke up seemed to have a clear idea how this could be done; rather, they agreed that no good, effective channel existed for making the political class listen. Several people argued that voting was even worth it. One woman in her twenties went up to argue that not voting sends no message at
all; the only thing was to go in, sign up, and leave the ballot blank. “I want to show them, look, I came this far, but I can’t choose anyone. There’s no one who represents me.” At one point, a young man stepped up to say, “I’ve heard a lot of different ideas, but I don’t think we really disagree so much. Tell me, do you all agree about this: that Italy is going badly?” the crowd murmured its assent. “That it is the fault of the politicians?” The crowd agreed even more loudly.

Indeed, running through the various contributions was the sentiment that the political class was busy pursuing its own elite or particular interests and was increasingly unresponsive to the concerns of the electorate. Many named the current Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, as the prime culprit but criticisms were not limited to him alone. Speaker after speaker expressed his or her (mostly his, as the crowd and speakers were predominately men) frustrations and feelings of powerlessness in the face of a system that seemed, from where they were standing, wholly distant and impenetrable. Politicians in general are not accountable, participants agreed; they are driving the country into the ground and there is nothing we can do about it.

As I watched and took notes, I heard the young, dark-haired man in front of me saying quietly to his friend that “switching out Berlusconi for Prodi doesn’t change anything.” I leaned forward and touched his shoulder to get his attention. “You should go up,” I told him. “Up where?” “Up there.” I gestured to clarify, as at the time I didn’t know the word for stepstool. “No, I can’t,” he replied. “Why not?” I asked, but he only shrugged and went back to smoking his cigarette. He kept turning back to gauge my reaction to what was being said, however, so the next time someone stepped down I once
again gestured at the stool. “They are all middle class…” he said, in what I began to realize was heavily accented Italian. “All cultured/educated [educati]…I don’t speak Italian.” As he was clearly speaking Italian, I made a face at this. “But that’s just what is needed,” I replied. “Something different. Everyone has an opinion, so do you – you could go up and say, even though my Italian isn’t perfect, this is what I think…” He smiled, but shook his head. “No, I’m not even Italian, I’m from Cuba.” He looked away, towards the enormous façade of the central cathedral, dedicated to Bologna’s patron saint, that towers over the square. “Plus I would want to say [something] about the Church…I’m waiting for my permit to stay. If I go up here, in front of the church, you know what they would do to me…” To emphasize, he indicated the walking groups of five or six armed carabinieri military police officers who were once again passing through the square on their constant rounds.

I could not, in the end, fault the man for not wanting to expose himself in such a setting. He was right that the political and cultural role of the Catholic Church was never mentioned by speakers, not the disproportionate economic power it holds or the fact that the clergy regularly take a stand against representative democracy by encouraging people not to vote on referendums they oppose so that the referendum will be discredited by failing from lack of participation rather than being defeated by majority opposition. And he was also right that everyone who spoke maintained markedly high standards of elocution. Civil and polite in this case meant using the formal “Lei” form of address, perfect grammar and sophisticated rhetorical formulations. Personally, I would not have gotten up on the stepstool in front of such an audience for a million dollars, so I could
certainly understand his point. Still, I eventually wandered away thinking that it was a
shame he felt unable to participate. It seemed a regrettable reproduction of the same
exclusion and powerlessness expressed by those who did speak up in relation to a
national political system they perceived as closed, distant and unresponsive. No wonder, I
thought, they felt there was little point in voting or any other form of participating
actively in the national political community.

Looking elsewhere, however, I found a very different scene, at a place called
XM24. It was about six in the evening and the sun was just touching down over the hills
that ring Bologna, making the usual overcast sky glow with color. I pedaled my bicycle
into the neighborhood called Bolognina (little Bologna), just north of the city center
behind the main train station, and pulled up to the entrance. It was easy to recognize the
one story concrete building that hosts XM24 because the entire surface is painted with a
mural by the internationally recognized painter Blu, who began his street art career in
Bologna. At the end of the long painted wall I arrived at a heavy metal gate, the kind that
rolls to the side to admit vehicles, a remnant of the building’s former life as a commercial
fruit and vegetable market. The gate is painted in stripes of bright pink (almost fuchsia)
and black, contrasting sharply with the dull grey of the surrounding area. A large
waterproof banner hanging on the gate reads Spazio Pubblico Autogestito Antifascista
(self-managed, anti-fascist public space) followed by a packed list of the activities going
on inside, starting with Laboratorio Anti-Proibizionista (anti-prohibitionist laboratory)
and ending with Laboratorio di Ricupero e Reciclaggio (recovery and recycling
laboratory).
The gate wasn’t open, but I had learned through trial and error that it is rarely actually locked, and if you push hard enough it will roll open a few feet to let you in. I entered, pushing my bike past several planters sprouting weeds (the remnants of an urban horticulture demo project from last year) and into a large space open on two sides and protected by an enormous metal and glass awning that extends out over the open space. The immediate impression was a combination of aesthetic pandemonium and leisurely human activity set against a backdrop of urban decay. All of the interior vertical surfaces (and even some of the horizontal ones) are painted with graffiti and street art, with new pieces overlapping old ones and any intervening space filled with little messages and comments added in permanent markers, but I can’t let myself get lost in looking around – I have to watch where I’m going so I don’t steer my bicycle into any of the holes or cracks that riddle the concrete underfoot. I wound my way among an eclectic mix of furniture: long metal conference-room type tables, folding chairs and round café tables, wooden pallets stacked four deep and fold-up theater seats still attached together in long rows.

Among this profusion of recycled and scavenged elements, there is a wide variety of activity. Against the far wall there’s a small camper painted in a riot of colors, the mobile office of the “Lab57” project that travels to parties, raves and similar events to spread a message of harm reduction and circulate information about legal and illegal psychoactive substances. When not traveling around northern and central Italy, the project’s main organizer lives here at XM24 in an RV parked out back. The bar off to one side, made out of scavenged plywood panels, won’t open until later tonight when visitors
start arriving for a book presentation. Still, this evening there were at least fifteen or twenty people already using the space, including four or five Italian men of varying ages smoking and chatting in a loose circle, a group of teenage boys from northern Africa playing on the battered foosball table that stands in the middle of the open space, a yoga class in the gym (mixed but predominantly women), two people using the computers in the free internet room, a local punk band practicing in one of the rooms underground and several unchained dogs playing chase.

Other spaces, such as the room hosting classes of Italian as a second language, the walk-in legal advice and medical clinic for immigrants, or the “Infoshock” library/bookstore, will open later in the evening. At the far end, past several doors leading to rooms used for meetings, there’s a bicycle repair workshop where several twenty-something Italian men are working. I leaned my bike against a bare spot of wall, careful to avoid the bike salvage area, marked with a sign warning people that any bicycles left there will be considered donations and treated accordingly. The hours for the bike shop are scribbled on a little white board hanging on the wall, but it’s actually open most of the time, whenever anyone is using the tools and equipment.

Inside XM24 there are signs and banners everywhere, from the handwritten pieces of paper distinguishing the general trash from the glass recycling or the list of prices at the bar to the hand-painted sign over the door of the “SIM” (School of Italian with Migrants) and the Infoshock. However, it’s easy to miss these indicators in the deep shadows and among the murals, graffiti and general confusion of signs if you don’t know what you’re looking for. The first few times I came to XM, I just wandered around
confused, unable to find my way around or understand what the various rooms were used
for. Unless you already know what to expect, it’s hard at first glance to perceive the
purpose and character of the space or understand what these scattered people are up to.
From the Italian classes to the collective kitchen, from the free internet service to the
bookstore/library, this profusion of activity prompts the question, how do all these
diverse initiatives find commonality? What kind of place is this, and what kind of
political and cultural engagement does it host?

**Between civil society, the state and social movements: Investigating Italian social
centers**

At the current moment, when voter turnout continues to decrease (Anderson
2011) and mass popular uprisings such as those in northern Africa and the Middle East
are re-fashioning the political map, questions of political participation and dissent are
more pressing than ever. In established democracies and newly democratized states alike,
an active, informed and potentially dissenting citizenry is often seen as the necessary
balance to overreaching state power and unregulated market forces. Anthropologists have
long been interested in citizens’ active participation in the political community, but they
currently struggle to keep abreast of a proliferation of new forms and foci of citizens’
engagement. While collective political action has long been conceptualized as formed
around blocks of shared interests or collective identities arising from shared positions in a
system of social relations, such as class-based movements, the so-called New Social
Movements, such as second wave feminism and the environmental movement,
challenged scholars to look beyond interest blocks to consider how collective political action might arise in response to new forms of power that work through everyday lifeworlds and forms of knowledge. Many view the Zapatista Uprising in 1993 as having inaugurated a new era of political activism, one marked by phenomena such as the World and European Social Forums that confound conventional analytical categories in the study of social protest. These contemporary phenomena define their collective practice more by what they oppose than by what they pursue, thereby bringing together multiple foci of struggle. They often manifest less as movements or collectivities and more as networks, in which the network represents both an instrument of communication and a model for organizing social relations in order to pursue shared goals without sacrificing differences of ideology and identity, or local and individual autonomy (Juris 2008).

The phenomena of collective, consensus-based autonomous spaces in Italy (commonly called centri sociali occupati autogestiti (occupied, self-managed social centers) or CSOA is another such manifestation of political contestation that challenges established frames of reference. Rather than a form of collective action mobilized around shared foci and agendas, social centers host a range of participants occupying a variety of social positions and carrying a wide range of concerns; ideological homogeny is neither required for participation nor valued by participants. Social centers are simultaneously political and cultural: their foci and discourses are baldly political, yet much of their political opposition is enacted through expressive culture; they engage in a kind of collective action that uses global economic, media and cultural flows while at the same time critiquing them. With their focus on the everyday enacting of political alternatives,
social centers transcend or complicate the conventional distinction between revolution and reform as well as between individual transformation and larger social change.

The various projects carried out by social center participants range from the local, such as weekly farmer’s markets involving exclusively local producers or a protest event staged to draw attention to (the failures of) municipal policy, to the transnational, such as solidarity projects with media centers in Latin America, or the global, such as protests surrounding international environmental summits. At the same time, in contrast to for instance the transnationally networked anti-globalization movement, participants at Italian social centers are anchored in place (and, inevitably, engaged in local political, social and economic relations) through the physical space of the center.

Given the way they straddle boundaries and respond simultaneously to multiple strategies of description, social centers are difficult to fit within established analytical frames. With their multifaceted range of practices and hybrid political-cultural-civic character, they display multiple faces, each of which could potentially call for a different line of investigation and analysis. Rather than close off these multiple angles of investigation by choosing a single aspect for investigation to the exclusion of others, I propose to focus on three aspects that speak most directly to the larger questions of the changing face of citizenship, governance and collective dissent today: the way that Italian social centers function as (unofficial) civic associations, the way that they represent a dramatically public instance of illegality, and the way that they represent sites of political activism. Though often treated as relatively separate in scholarly inquiry, these three features or spheres of activity are closely interwoven in the form, function and everyday
enactment of Italian social centers. Furthermore, I propose that the apparently divergent investigative agendas they suggest can be brought together within the analytical lens of citizenship and I conclude this introduction by outlining how I propose to use this theoretical lens in my investigation of social centers in Bologna, Italy.

The civic engagement argument: social centers as a form of civic association

The idea of a civil society sphere peopled by active, engaged citizens has enjoyed a revival in the last decade, emerging from multiple quarters: in relation to political and social transformations in Eastern Europe, where a strong civil society is seen as the necessary counterweight to move from totalitarian regimes to free market policies and democratic structures, and similarly in dictatorial contexts in Latin America, where civil society has been encouraged as a means to empower citizens in the face of overbearing states and military rule (Ehrenberg 1996, Foley and Edwards 1996, Paley 2001). While in these contexts civil society is valued for its capacity to resist or counterbalance autocratic governments, it is also widely championed as a force that sustains, strengthens and improves the quality and effectiveness of democracy in established democratic states as well. From Alexis de Tocqueville (Democracy in America, 1835) to Robert Putnam (especially Making Democracy Work, 1993 and Bowling Alone, 2000), scholars have praised the way that voluntary associational groups function to teach their members the habits of civility that guarantee a healthy democratic polity (Foley and Edwards 1996: 39). In the context of the European Union, the idea of active civil engagement has been championed in response to concerns about a democratic deficit in the EU while engaged collective action (paired with substantial responsibilities for citizens) is central to the
British “third way” of politics proposed as an alternative to both the individualizing Right and the outdated neo-Marxist Left (Rose 2000).

Although specific definitions differ, most proponents of civil society identify it as the sum total of those horizontally organized groups that make up the sphere of private voluntary association; Putnam, for instance, focuses on groups ranging from neighborhood committees and interest groups to sports clubs, mutual aid societies, cultural or voluntary associations and cooperatives. While each group or association is itself a site of cooperation and engagement, such groups also (according to proponents such as Putnam) produce and function through wider networks of civic engagement that cut across social distinctions and cleavages. In so doing, these networks of civic engagement and the “norms of reciprocity” that characterize them (1993:171) give rise to “social capital,” (a term that originated in Putnam’s work but has gained wide usage) which is understood as the combination of trustworthiness and predilection to trust that facilitates spontaneous cooperation. This “capital” is productive in that it allows people to accomplish things through cooperation (because they trust each other), while at the same time the use of social capital (carrying out collective projects that depend on trust) produces more of it.

Civil society groups are thus seen as encouraging tolerance, cooperation, and the practice of civilized debate while at the same time teaching citizens how to organize and mobilize on behalf of public causes (Almond and Verbena 1963), which in turn gives rise
to an active, responsible polity and therefore an effective and stable democracy.\(^1\) In addition, and particularly in transitioning and developing contexts, the involvement of “local community” through non-governmental and civil society groups is promoted as a strategy for reducing the populace’s dependence on the state and international aid by providing services and teaching citizens to do for themselves (Paley 2001:3, see also Ferraro 2003, Pearce 2007).

The discourse promoting civic engagement and the qualities of active citizenship has been particularly noticeable in Italy, a fact which should be read against the backdrop of widespread doubts about the strength of Italian democracy, national identity and civic culture. Specifically, Italy has been haunted in the post-war period by a perceived failure of civic virtue or capacity and a commonsense view that the country’s democracy is “seriously underperforming” and “incomplete” (Donovan 2001: 242). Although Italy was one of the six founding members of the EEC/EU, its position among other modern western democracies, rather than being taken for granted, is continually scrutinized and debated in the discourse of political figures, and everyday talk, and newspaper accounts comparing the attributes of EU states. When I mentioned my research into “political

\(^1\) Of course, not all scholars writing about civil society agree that there is a direct or even positive relationship between associations, voluntary organizations, etc. and a healthy democracy. Even within more normative or policy-oriented scholarship there is active debate about whether or not, how or to what extent active civil society actually does make people more open-minded and willing to work together, or (as a more limited and less optimistic minimum) at least prepare individuals to assume the responsibilities of active citizenship such as participating in open debate, listening to the viewpoint of others, and making an informed selection among electoral candidates; some question that these effects are necessarily characteristic of civil society participation (see, for e.g. Foley and Edwards 1996, Kohn 2002, Hamidi 2003). Among more critical approaches, scholars also point out that civil society organizations are used to shore up the state in contexts and moments of structural adjustment, in that they are delegated the task of delivering services in order to prop up capitalism as states withdraw from social service provision (Paley 2001, Hyatt 2001, Hyatt and Lyon-Callo 2003, etc) and thus promoted as key components of “development” by neoliberal policymakers (Lazar 2004, Pearce 2007).
participation/engagement among young people,” the most common response I received from Italians of all ages, political orientations and regional origins is some variation of “Really? Good luck finding any of that!” or, “You’ve come to the wrong place, we’re in bad shape here.”

This sentiment is hardly new: one of the most well-known works that addresses political participation in Italy, still widely cited today, is Edward C. Banfield’s book *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1967) in which the American political scientist and policy consultant characterizes a town in southern Italy, and by implication the entire nation, as culturally incapable of recognizing common interests or working together for the common good. Like Robert Putnam’s work, Banfield’s argument rests on the idea that a certain kind of social organization (specifically, non-kin-based and formally structured forms of association such as political associations and other corporate groups) is a necessary prerequisite for economic and political development, and specifically for the development of democratic society and the capacity for “self-government” (1967:7), and that Italian national culture itself impedes the construction of these kinds of social relations. This accusation of failed civic culture is also confirmed by Banfield’s contemporary and fellow American political scientist Gabriel A. Almond, who argued that Italian civic and political culture is characterized by “relatively unrelieved political alienation and social isolation and distrust” (Almond and Verba 1963: 402).

Though Banfield and Almond wrote more than four decades ago, contemporary echoes of these iconic accounts of the triumph of “backward” cultural values over modern democratic civility continue to form a common thread in both scholarly and
public discourse in and about Italy. They currently appear in assessments of the weaknesses of the Italian economy by the British periodical *The Economist* (“Addio, Dolce Vita”, November 26, 2005), the state of Italian civil society (Putnam 1993), the strength and performance of Italian democracy (Donovan 2001) and Italy’s declining birthrate (Della Zuanna 2001). Furthermore, these concerns span the political spectrum; they are taken up even by leftist Italian intellectuals, who debate the origins of what they perceive to be an uncivil “national character” among Italians (Patriarca 2001). In the winter of 2010-2011, this discourse once again re-emerged in relation to the scandals involving the P.M. Berlusconi and various underage women who he was accused of paying for sex. “Why do Italians continue to put up with Berlusconi’s antics?” was the question of the day in the international press, suggesting that the P.M.’s continued influence was due to an apathetic and non-responsive electorate. Of course participation in national elections and participation in civil society should be analytically distinguished as two separate (if interrelated) issues, but nonetheless much of the discussion surrounding ongoing political corruption and moral misbehavior in Italy conflates these two dimensions of engagement (civil and political) by asserting that the seeming political paralysis of the electorate is related to a lack of civic culture in the sense that Italians have trouble acting collectively in pursuit of the common good.

Given this acute concern about promoting engaged citizenship and effective democracy, one might expect self-managed, occupied social centers (CSOA) to be valorized for their contribution to the vital sphere of civil society. In many ways (as I will describe in more detail in the following chapters) CSOA do correspond to the criteria
used to promote civil society: they represent a form of cooperation between citizens and are organized in a horizontal way that encourages the building of trust between participants engaged in the pursuit of common goals. From a position outside of the clientilistic tradition of the mass political parties, they address a variety of issues that implicate the common good. They are open to a variety of opinions and forms of participation and, through the consensus-based decision making process that is considered a hallmark of these spaces, they not only allow but actually require open debate. Self-managed, occupied social centers (CSOA) also provide services (such as medical services and legal advice for migrants, lessons in Italian as a second language, and the distribution of hard-to-find self-published texts through their library/bookshops) in a way that, I would argue, fills the kind of role for which civil society organizations are praised and valued. If the Italian national context is widely considered to be in need of more and more effective civic engagement to improve its democracy, and occupied, self-managed social centers in many ways represent the kind of associational life that is often considered to be a key ingredient and promotional factor in the health of a democracy, it is natural to ask: Why are CSOA in Italy under attack? Why they so frequently represented in mainstream media and political discourse as negative (threatening, suspicious or generally illegitimate) or even anti-civil phenomena?

By treating CSOA as a (potentially valuable and legitimate) example of civic engagement, my analysis intentionally and consciously runs counter to not only the reoccurring, dominant public sphere discourse distinguishing CSOA from other, more “virtuous” components of civil society, but also the self-conception of many of my
interviewees about what they are doing. Indeed, CSOA participants regularly distinguish themselves and their practices from other examples of civic engagement and resist pressures to become formal associations despite the benefits and possibilities this status would grant them (see Chapter Two for a more detailed discussion of this differentiation). Nonetheless, I find this unconventional framing useful for the way it raises a constellation of productive questions about the character of Italian social centers and their place in the fabric of contemporary urban life in general and local power relations in particular. For instance, how do they interact with other non-electoral voluntary organizations? How do they express their positions on issues of common concern? What is their position in relation to local authorities and governing structures? If we are exploring social centers as an example of civic engagement, it also makes sense to ask questions about how they are organized, who is included and excluded, how they make decisions and deal with conflict, and what kinds of interests and agendas they pursue.

Examining CSOA in terms of their contribution to civil society also raises questions about civil society itself, or rather about the relatively uncritical or power-blind way it is often treated within discourses about development and democracy. CSOA and the conflicts that surround them speak not only to the non-uniform character of actual civil society engagement, but also to the implicit limits that are embedded in the internationally championed civil society model described above, or activated when it is translated into practice in each specific context. I am thinking about limits both in terms of how individual participation is conceptualized as well as, even more implicitly but no less importantly, limits on who is permitted to participate and contribute. On one hand,
civic engagement is deemed a vital component of a functioning democratic society, but on the other hand manifestations of this engagement that supersede established institutional boundaries end up stigmatized and devalued. The conflicts surrounding CSOA can help to reveal some of these implicit limits, and, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, it is in the challenging of these limits that they propose new models of what citizenship could and ‘should’ be.

At the same time, however, considering CSOA as a component of civil society potentially obscures another important element of their nature, the very element that effectively distinguishes them from other civic groups and unites them as a recognizable phenomenon: their illegality. This illegality is a common referent in public discourse that represents CSOA as contributing, not to the sphere of civic engagement, but to the sphere of criminality and perceived deviance. That is to say, occupied, self-managed social centers represent an anomalous example of civic engagement because they not only engage with and criticize prevailing positions on issues of common concern, they also actively work to dismantle and create alternatives to established institutions and forms of social organization, including the rule of law.

For example, CSOA participants are often vocal critics of government policies on immigration control and the treatment of migrants domestically; at the same time, through free language classes, medical aid and legal advice for documented and undocumented migrants alike, they seek to undermine or nullify the effects of government policies that work to reproduce the distinction between documented and undocumented and make it matter in all spheres of life, from employment and residence
to marriage and individual mobility. In relation to migration law, CSOA participants thus work in multiple ways to undermine the effective weight of legality. Likewise, CSOA are not only a source of oppositional discourse about local zoning laws and tenant rights, they are also commonly formed through the illegal occupation of private or public property. Nonetheless, as I observed in Bologna, neighborhood and municipal authorities do not usually refuse to deal with or acknowledge CSOA, nor do they usually arrest participants for violating property rights. The reality is more ambiguous and complicated, an inconsistent process of negotiation and compromise in which the legal code is ignored as often as it is invoked and legal instruments form only a part of the strategies authorities use to press their positions.

In order to capture this element of CSOA form and practice, they must also be viewed through an analytical lens capable of recognizing interchanges between legal and illegal spheres, between the state and its ‘opposite’ in terms of the rule of law, within a dynamic field of power relations in which the state is not the only influential player. This brings me to a second element of CSOA: their disregard for and/or open contestation of not only specific legal codes and regulations but the entire trope of state-based legality, a sphere of discourse and practice that raises questions about the interplay of cultural politics and the rule of law and casts doubt on the formal conception of law as the comprehensive, coherent reflection of the state’s power and authority.

**CSOA as illegal phenomena**
In order to analyze social centers’ conflictual relationship to legality, I draw on a thread of critical anthropological theorizing about illegality and crime that has been developed most prominently in relation to forced and undocumented migration. This scholarship on illegality stands out in contrast to more mainstream treatments of the subject due to its critical and post-structuralist orientation. As Josiah McC. Heyman and Alan Smart explain in their introduction to the volume *States and Illegal Practices* (1999), the majority of scholarship on illegality (conducted under the auspices of legal studies, history, jurisprudence and political science/political philosophy) has pursued one of two approaches: morally-oriented and/or normative studies that debate the rightness of legal codes and practices, or practical, policy oriented work that takes policy goals at face value and seeks to apply the rule of law to the resolution of social problems. In addition to these prescriptive approaches, scholars have also sought to explain illegal phenomena and practices by looking at crime as an indicator of underlying societal problems and deviance as the result of improper socialization or the product of underground subcultures that produce and legitimize it (1999: 3-4).

While these studies tend towards legal positivism – that is, they tend to treat the law as a definite system of rules and the line between legal and illegal as clear and definitive – the scholarship I draw on instead uses a post-structuralist lens to view the law as an “indeterminate system of meanings manipulated in actual social practice” (Heyman and Smart 1999:11) and produced through specific historical processes. It is only through the reification of law in its particular social context that it comes to appear as “definitive,
unimpeachable and logical” (ibid), and this process of reification is one of the primary
tasks the state pursues in order to reproduce its own authority and legitimacy.

In this way critical anthropological scholarship on illegality employs an
understanding of the state as simultaneously an idea (the perfect, idealized model of what
a state should be) and an empirical reality (the messy, politically charged sum of a variety
of practices that may or may not function in tandem) (Abrams 1988). The trick as a
scholar is to take a step back from the ideology of the state in order to investigate it as a
resource used in political and cultural maneuvering by various actors as well as serving to
obscure the empirical reality in which state actors collude with their supposed ‘opposites’
outside the rule of law. By moving away from a treatment of law (and state functions
more generally) as reflecting a coherent underlying logic and structure, this critical
approach pushes scholars to view representations of state coherence and rationality as
part and parcel of the effort to build hegemony and thus as something that can be
historically located, questioned and analytically dismantled into its component parts.

From this perspective, the development and application of law can be seen as one
of the forms of technical intervention that characterize contemporary governance, and
which are brought out in response to specific historical forces; as such, law is both
dynamic and contingent. As Nicholas De Genova argues, “the intricate history of law-
making is distinguished above all by the constitutive restlessness and relative incoherence
of various strategies, tactics, and compromises that nation-states implement at particular
historical moments, precisely to mediate the contradictions immanent in social crises and
political struggles, above all, around the subordination of labor” (2002: 425). Through
detailed, empirical analyses of the actual operations of law in specific sites, scholars can reveal the “material force of law, its instrumentality, its historicity, [and] its productivity of some of the most meaningful and salient parameters of sociopolitical life” (2002: 432).

For instance, using an analytical focus on the productivity of law, scholars investigate how the same legal system that produces legal citizenship also produces forced and undocumented migration, phenomena that can be seen as citizenship’s alterities in the sense that they represent a disruption or inversion of the expected relationship of people to states – that of legal citizenship. While the majority of social science research and policy discourse treats illegal migration and displacement as problematic deviations from law and order because they appear to represent the opposite of legal citizenship, the status of illegal migrant is also “a juridical status that entails a social relation to the state” just like legal citizenship (De Genova 2002: 422). Instead of simply seeing them as deviations that threaten stability and legality, it is possible to view such “unsanctioned alternatives” (Greenhouse 1999) to citizenship as products of the same structures and processes that produce legality and state citizenship. Recent anthropological work in these fields suggests that, by focusing on how these disruptive state-individual relationships are produced, scholars can de-naturalize legal citizenship and, more broadly, illuminate the historical, legal, political and economic processes through which both legality and illegality or statelessness are produced (Malkki 1995, Greenhouse 1999, Coutin 1999a and 1999b).

I draw on the critical approach modeled by this field of scholarship to view Italian social centers as a potentially revealing site where the boundaries between legal and
illegal (which are themselves an aspect of ongoing state interventions intended to produce disciplined and manageable populations) are extended but also contested. Rather than two separate and mutually exclusive conditions, we can view repressive law-enforcement campaigns and outright state-criminal collusion as two ends of the same continuum. If we are willing to concede that the line between legal and illegal is not so clear cut or static after all, it makes sense to investigate under what circumstances the distinction is reinforced and under what circumstances – and to what ends – states instead (or simultaneously) tolerate or collude with certain forms of illegality. If we recognize that the rule of law does not represent an exclusive embodiment of authority (discursive, moral, etc.), then what other forms of authority impact on relations between CSOA and local authorities? Furthermore, as the close-grained ethnographic scholarship cited here demonstrates, these processes of negotiation and re-negotiation are both historically specific and culturally significant; in order to understand interactions between CSOA and local state actors, we must look to the interplay of both material and cultural forces and the way that they are variously mobilized and used by both state and CSOA actors.

**CSOA as a site of activism**

While research on collective political action in the 1960s and 70s focused on revolution and scholars in the 1980s began to search out everyday but individual and largely concealed forms of resistance such as Scott’s (1985) “weapons of the weak,” in the 1990s researchers began to recognize and explore the increasing prevalence of action between these two extremes, phenomena such as collective dissent and direct action (Fox
and Starn 1997). Using a lens of cultural politics, this body of literature posits the inextricability of the culture of politics and the politics of culture (Alvarez et al 1998, Coutin 1993, Fox and Starn 1997), a position which is especially evident in literature theorizing the “new social movements” such as second wave feminism and the environmental movement which are seen as “new” or historically specific in that they contest a contemporary form of power that works through everyday lifeworlds, including forms of knowledge and cognitive processes (Laclau and Mouffe 1989, Touraine 1988, Melucci 1989, 1996). Building on reworkings of Marxist analysis such as Raymond Williams’ rejection of the base/superstructure dichotomy, these scholars seek to incorporate a notion of culture “as central to the motivating logic of society” (Nash 2005:10). While previous research focused on class-based mobilization in specific sites of labor (Nash 2005:10), new social movement theorists propose “multiplex analyses” that are actor-centered (Touraine 1988) and recognize the multiple social positions that subjects simultaneously occupy (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Unlike universal liberal models of politically active citizens, then, this actor-centered theoretical approach suggests that political practice is crosscut by multiple forms of difference embodied by multiply positioned actors (Boccia 2005).

This theoretical shift away from class-based and identity-homogenous mobilization and towards struggle in the sphere of culture can be seen to have set the stage for contemporary anthropological scholarship that focuses on social protest within and through culture, protest that mobilizes in relation to forms of collective identity and struggle over “symbolic, informational, and cultural resources and rights to specificity

This body of scholarship thus explores how social protest conducted through cultural production is the site of many diverse and politically inflected processes, including the creation of new public spaces (Merrill 2004, Urla 2003) and the re/definition of social group boundaries as movements seek to construct and mobilize around shared agendas (Escobar and Alvarez 1992, Escobar 1997, Urla 2001, Woolard 1989). Faye Ginsburg argues that these struggles in and through culture represent an important contemporary concern for anthropologists, and proposes the label of “cultural activism” as a heuristic device to draw scholars’ attention to “the way that people engage in self-conscious mobilization of their own culture practices in order to defend, extend, complicate, and sometimes transform both their immediate worlds and the larger sociopolitical structures that shape them” (2004:xiii, italics in the original; see also 1997). This analytical device of “cultural activism” suggests interesting lines of investigation in
relation to Italian social centers: for instance, how is cultural production in social centers mobilized in the service of participants’ political agendas? What specific constellations of meaning, values and practice do CSOA participants seek to oppose, and what alternative constellations do they offer?

In addition to this focus on culture, I also engage with another theoretical issue that emerges in contemporary anthropological studies of social protest: that of collective action as productive rather than reflective of pre-determined phenomena. While social movement literature in sociology and political science conventionally conceptualizes collective political action as the strategic pursuit of rational self-interest through the mobilization of available resources (McAdam et al 1996, McAdam et al 2001), many anthropologists instead follow poststructuralist political theorists such as Melucci (1996) and Laclau (1994) in approaching collective action as productive of self-interest, as well as group identity and cohesion, rather than reflective of it (Albro 2005, French 2004, Flores and Benmayor 1997, Gibson-Graham 2006, Kemp et al 2000, Rosaldo 1994a, 1994b). Such scholarship explores how, as groups make claims for rights or contest dominant visions of how the world should be, they simultaneously appeal to and transform participants’ subjectivities (Urla in press). Drawing on this approach, I aim to explore social center participants’ political practice as a site of meaning making and, potentially, the creation of new or transformed habits of thought and action that can be seen as the building blocks for new models of Italian citizenship.

Although this line of investigation clearly contributes a strong theoretical frame and a potentially interesting set of questions to guide my investigation, it does not
perfectly capture the strange, slippery object that is Italian social centers. For instance, while participants do share some political ideals and goals, many do not see themselves as activists or identify what they are doing as political activism. The multiple foci and concerns addressed through social center activities engage simultaneously with multiple established social movements (including but not limited to anti- or alternative globalization, feminism, anti-racism and immigration reform, drug legalization, environmentalism, peace and social justice) but viewing them as simply a site for the development of these social movements risks blinding us to the fact that they are also specific sites of cultural production and for the development of multiple cultural undergrounds (punk music, hacking, squatting, street art and performance, alternative/non-commercial media production, etc.). Furthermore, while much contemporary social movement activity involves disparate actors networking across distances in order to organize protest events, social centers are powerfully rooted in space; in order to understand their collective practice and what it produces, it is thus essential to grant at least as much attention to local political and cultural forces as to transnational networking activities.

Participants in these locally rooted multivalent spaces often use the term “laboratory” to refer to the character and function of social centers. What, then, are they cooking up? Broadly speaking, they appear to produce alternative political imaginaries, ways of understanding how power works and the prospects for individual and collective action in existing fields of power. The collective generation and enactment of these political imaginaries involves (re)conceptualizing and differently representing social and
political relations between individuals, the relationship between the individual and the larger collectivity, and the way boundaries should be drawn between who is included and who is not. In so doing, I argue, they produce alternative (in the sense of a proposed substitution for what is seen as the dominant version) models of both who should be included in the national political community and what political participation itself should involve. In order to better understand the link between these two dimensions, I look to the literature on citizenship and especially the concept of cultural citizenship developed in recent anthropological literature.

**Using the lens of citizenship**

I have thus far outlined three different ways that CSOA may be framed analytically. Although these framings may seem at first glance to be somewhat divergent, they co-terminate in an analysis with several interrelated foci. First, a focus on the internal functioning of the social centers (everyday practices, decision making processes, how they carry out collective projects and deal with internal conflicts) in order to investigate both what cultural-political values it reflects and what it produces in terms of individual and collective identity, social relations and discourses. Examining CSOA in terms of their contribution to civic society, we come to the question of what implicit limits are embedded in the civil society model or activated when it is translated into practice in each specific context, limits on both how participation/contributions should take place as well as, even more implicitly but no less affectively, who can
participate/contribute. Through their conflict-ridden and controversial place in larger civic and political spheres, CSOA provide a useful window onto these limits, and, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, it is in the challenging of these limits that they propose new models of what citizenship could and should be.

At the same time, these sites are understood as immersed in a field of power. Drawing on critical scholarship on the state and legality, I conceptualize this field as one in which the state is active but not the only actor, and in which overt political and legal conflicts reflect and are shaped by tensions between different historically specific cultural-political models; these models valorize and maneuver ideals of the state and the rule of law, among other resources. If state power is understood as uneven and deeply caught up with dynamic, local cultural and political forces, the conflicts surrounding Italian CSOA can be seen as the contingent and messy product of multiple potentially competing discursive projects being carried forward simultaneously. Just as dominant discursive projects are reproduced through cultural channels (media representations; public debates, meetings and ceremonies; commemorative events; etc.), social center participants also use cultural channels to propose their alternatives (self-published media, concerts and parties, debates and seminars, etc.). While these projects seek to valorize certain cultural-political values over others (for instance, the values attached to representative democracy in favor of those surrounding direct action) and draw on different resources to do so, they reveal themselves to be both incomplete and contested on all sides.
In this sense, an understanding of CSOA as simultaneously forms of civic engagement, illegality and cultural activism can be integrated into a coherent approach and set of questions that focus on both what participants do and how they do it, and investigate the connection between the two. The last ingredient in my analytical toolkit, the one that arguably unites all the others, is a critical concept of citizenship. While citizenship can and has been approached as a primarily legal status signaling an individual’s connection to a nation-state with all the attendant rights and obligations, it can also be viewed as a cultural and political identity that brings together the dimension of participation (in the national polity, through voting or jury duty, for instance, as well in the local political community through channels that are often not independent of legal citizenship status) together with the dimension of belonging (in multiple collectivities that likewise range from national to local). Furthermore, as I will argue throughout this dissertation, the workings of citizenship reveal the intrinsic link between these two dimensions, in that forms of belonging can arise from participation even in lieu of formal legal recognition and participation itself is conditioned by the cultural politics of belonging (if you are not considered to belong, your voice has less or little weight in participative processes). Although the ideological ideal of citizenship is supposed to indicate and enable active involvement in the polity, at the same time citizenship also defines and delimits belonging and so it has always entailed forms of exclusion, namely exclusion from the sphere of political participation as a result of exclusion from the culturally-defined collectivity of the nation (or locality).
The two main arguments that run throughout this dissertation follow directly from this premise and are intended to contribute to this theoretical node: First, I argue that social center participants in Bologna reject, both explicitly in their discourse and more implicitly through their practice, the prevailing idea that shared political identity should underlie (or is a necessary or desirable prerequisite for) collective action. Rather than seeking to construct a shared adherence to specific ideological positions, thoroughly overlapping values or common political identity (as in membership in a party, union or lobby, for instance), they instead seek to engage in a form of collective practice that neither depends on nor demands assimilation on the part of new participants. Rather, they deliberately model a form of what has been called “multiple belonging” (Della Porta 2004), in this case built on and through everyday collective practice, and which cuts across ideological differences. In other words, they belong by doing rather than doing because they belong.

Second, I argue that this model of belonging through doing rather than based on shared political identity can be understood as a new or alternative model of citizenship in which belonging and participation are closely linked. This is in direct contrast to prevailing models of Italian citizenship that make a weak or problematic connection between belonging and participation, in that formal electoral politics are ever more disconnected from the everyday lives and concerns of citizens and the channels through which citizens might demand accountability from elected officials are seriously obstructed while the main bases of belonging are increasingly located in exclusive territorial, ethnic and sexual identities. By opposing prevailing models of citizenship and
enacting alternative models, I argue, social center participants in Bologna are simultaneously contesting ideas about who should be authorized to speak in relation to issues of common concern as well as, even more fundamentally, how politics should be conceptualized and practiced.

The dissertation is organized as follows: In chapter two, I explore the position of Italian social centers in relation to electoral politics, civil society and associational life in Italy by tracing the historical origins of Italian social centers from the emergence of the cooperative and mutual aid movement in the nineteenth century through to the political and cultural upheavals of the late 1960s and 70s. This account touches on the economic, political, cultural and legislative forces that have shaped Italian civic associations over time and which contribute to distinguishing occupied, self-managed social centers from other forms of civic and political engagement in Italy. At the same time, my account weaves the development of Italian civic associations together with the unfolding of collective political dissent in order to show the dynamic and enduring connections that have existed between these (ostensibly distinct) spheres of activity over time. I end this historical narrative by outlining the challenges currently facing CSOA in Bologna in a context of economic upheaval, shifting demographics, and discourses that make security a central concern of urban planning.

In chapter three, I introduce the demographic and socio-economic contours of the city of Bologna and the sites where I carried out fieldwork. I focus on social center participants, addressing the questions of who they are, what forms their participation takes, what draws them to engage in CSOA projects and what identity effects their
participation generates. I examine participants’ descriptions of themselves and their engagement at CSOA, participant-observation of organizational meetings and public social center events in order to investigate the relationship between what participants do together and how they think about themselves. From this basis I develop the argument that the form of collective identity modeled by CSOA participants is a product of shared practice rather than a prerequisite for entrance to the center.

I outline the range of projects carried out at my fieldwork sites and the everyday practices through which these projects are implemented in chapter four. Focusing on the weekly organizational meeting as both vehicle and synecdoche for the process of “self-management” through horizontal social relations and the diffusion of authority and responsibility, I explore how the XM24 social center functions, including how participants make decisions, collectively develop shared goals and deal with internal conflicts. I investigate one particular aspect of participants’ practice, the construction of a contemporary conceptualization of anti-fascism, and explore how it functions as a “weak” answer (De Sousa Santos 2004) or “weak theory” (Gibson-Graham 2006) approach to conceptualizing and enacting political dissent.

Chapter five follows the development of a specific conception of security in north-central Italy and analyzes the way that that it brings issues of urban co-living and controversial uses of public space into the field of security discourse and policy. I examine both the rhetorical logics of security discourse and its concrete implementation through specific national and local legislation, tracing the discursive and material effects it has generated in recent years. I seek to position local discourses in relation to
securitization processes at the national, EU and global levels in which the widespread deployment of “states of emergency” (Agamben 2004) has been accompanied by the surrender of tasks traditionally handled by the state to the extent that the ability to ensure security – or the appearance of it – is becoming a primary basis of political legitimacy. I also explore how legislation drafted to address micro-criminality and immigration through the lens of security also carries with it “side effects” in terms of delimiting legitimate expressions of political dissent. I end by outlining two discursive framings through which CSOA participants have been painted as illegitimate or non-credible actors in national and local political and civil spheres: CSOA as sites of illegality and criminality that contribute to so-called urban blight, and CSOA as foreign and destabilizing in relation to ethnically, religiously and class-specific conceptions of the Italian national cultural community.

In the sixth and final chapter, I analyze several strategies that CSOA participants use to contest and oppose securitization processes, exclusive models of participation and belonging, and individualizing legal processes that support the veil of apolitical rationality underpinning state power. As I show, CSOA participants both oppose these processes by contesting the grounds of existing debates and seek to enact alternative models. In conclusion, I return to the concept of cultural citizenship and the premise that models of citizenship regulate and define belonging and participation. Using the lens of citizenship to look at the practice of CSOA participants, I argue, enables us to recognize the common thread that underlies the multiple and heterogeneous activities carried out through social centers in Bologna: a collective effort to challenge both the bases of
belonging and modes of participation embodied in prevailing citizenship models, as well as the limits they place on legitimate political dissent and engagement.
CHAPTER 2
PLACING OCCUPIED, SELF-MANAGED SOCIAL CENTERS IN ITALIAN ASSOCIATIONAL HISTORY

In this chapter I trace the contours of the forces that have contributed to the emergence of occupied, self-managed social centers (CSOA) in Italy, attempting to place them in context both historically and in relation to other phenomena of collective political dissent and civil sector engagement. My historical account follows the development of the cooperative movement and the evolution of civic associations from their emergence in the nineteenth century to the economic and political forces that shaped collective conflicts between workers and capitalists at the beginning of the twentieth century, in turn feeding the rise of Fascism and its simultaneous repression of collective dissent and incorporation of associational spaces. I outline the political and cultural generation gap that shaped Italian society toward the end of the boom years and the subsequent rise of a generationally linked autonomous and anti-systemic movement that re-formulated the deeply rooted tradition of Italian civic associations in the shape of CSOA, illegal or quasi-legal spaces deliberately independent of existing political and cultural institutions. While conventional cooperatives and civic associations continued to develop with the support and approval of the state, I concentrate on CSOA as they blaze a new path toward cultural-political contestation and outright conflict with authorities. I then focus briefly on these conflicts as a means of historicizing contemporary conflicts surrounding CSOA and in particular their association with criminality and illegality in public discourse.
The historical narrative I offer here is neither inclusive nor impartial; rather, it is a delimited and interested account of the forces I see as leading to the development of CSOA with a focus on those elements most visible and important in my own field sites, including political autonomy and antagonistic relations with governing institutions. It is thus not intended as an account of associationism in Italy in the broader sense, but rather as a way of locating occupied, self-managed social centers in time and space and providing some of the historical background that helps render contemporary phenomena meaningful and intelligible. In order to reconstruct the development of associations over time, I draw heavily on Italian historical and political science sources, which often treated associationism as a prominent and hugely important element of national history, celebrating the historical origins of this form of organization that remains central to Italian economy and society.

It is interesting to note that the history of associations has received much greater attention by Italian scholars than their Anglophone counterparts, who in looking at the history of modern Italy have often focused on the prominence of mass parties, especially the Italian communist party (Amyot 1981, Blackmer and Kriegel 1975, Kertzer 1980, 1996, Shore 1990) and the role of parties in shaping daily life (Kertzer 1980, Colclough 2000). In contrast with other Western democracies, Italy is often represented as a context poor in independent associational activity to such an extent that in a comparative volume on the voluntary sector, the title for the chapter on Italy is the provocative question, “Italy: Why No Voluntary Sector?” (Perlmutter 1991). Indeed, Ted Perlmutter, the Columbia-based author of the chapter emphasizes the relative scarcity of “autonomous”
organizations in Italy, that is, ones that are independent of the state and the main Communist or Catholic political parties.

Besides the specificity of the Italian context, this observation points to important disagreements in what is considered to constitute civil society. As social movement scholars Michael Foley and Bob Edwards note in their critical survey of arguments promoting civil society (1996), some scholars, such as Robert Putnam, consider political associations (and social movement organizations in general) to be something apart from the rest of civil society in view of the way they tend to embody particular and divisive interests rather than the transversal, inclusive concerns he seeks to identify with civil society organizations. In contrast, Tocqueville recognized the potential divisiveness of political associations in his well-known survey of associational life in America but ended up endorsing them regardless when argues that, while civil associations facilitate the development of political ones, political association on the other hand “singularly strengthens and improves associations for civil purposes” in that it “makes the love and practice of association more general; it imparts a desire of union, and teaches the means of combination to numbers of men who have always lived apart” (2005: 414/415). For Tocqueville, then, political associations can be seen as the “large free schools, where all the members of the community go to learn the general theory of free association” and thus the laboratory out of which civil associationism is born (415).

In view of this ongoing disagreement how to draw the border between civic and political collective activity, with this historical account I hope to foreground the active interplay that has existed between state, civil society and mass parties in Italy. From the
earliest workers’ cooperatives to the post-war circoli (local civic, cultural, recreational and/or political clubs or associations) sponsored and run by political parties, associational and political activity in Italy have been closely intertwined, and I seek to highlight these connections in my account of the development of CSOA. Rather than arguing over the line dividing civil and political organizations, I find it more useful to consider the borrowing and co-optations that has often occurred between the two and the role these dynamics have played in the development of occupied, self-managed social centers which, as I will show, grew out of an effort to escape precisely this cooptation of collective forms of political and civic engagement by established power structures, from the state and mass parties to the Catholic Church.

This account also represents an initial attempt to use the critical legal studies approach outlined above to interpret the historical forces that produced CSOA as well as the conflicts surrounding them. In addition to the material effects of specific legislation, I have thus tried to highlight how the rule of law as an ideology has also been strategically deployed for specific political ends. There are moments in my account when forms of illegality are tolerated or even encouraged by state actors, and contrasting moments when an inviolable conceptualization of the rule of law is upheld in the public sphere. Rather than treating the Italian state as a monolithic or coherent actor per se, I have attempted to trace the way that specific aspects of state power (the power to reshape police procedures and aspects of the judicial system, for instance, or to direct economic reform) have been variously used by the numerous actors that can be seen to exert influence on state functioning either from within or outside of the institutional political sphere, actors that
include national and local political party leaders, foreign governments, police chiefs and judges, industrial leaders, representatives of organized labor, Catholic clergy, and political activists both individually and collectively. In addition to locating CSOA within the larger sphere of political dissent and civic participation, this chapter also aims to introduce the various contingent forces that have contributed to producing the contemporary association of occupied, self-managed social centers with illegality, an association which will be examined in more detail in Chapter 5.

**Mutual aid for a new industrial working class: the Italian cooperative movement from the 1840s to the turn of the century**

The first cooperatives in Italy were modeled after a multi-faceted cooperative movement that developed in multiple European states in the early half of the nineteenth century in response to the brutal economic and social conditions produced by rapid industrialization and urbanization. To identify the economic and political forces behind the emergence of Italian cooperatives, I draw on the detailed account by economic historians Massimo Fornasari and Vera Zamagni, *Il Movimento Cooperativo in Italia: un profile storico-economico (1854-1992)* (1997). Fornasari and Zamagni identify the pioneering example of this kind of cooperative economic entity in 1844 in the Manchester area of England, where a group of handloom weavers who had seen their salaries drastically decreased with the advent of the power loom formed a consumer’s buying association in order to permit members to purchase basic necessities at wholesale prices. This first association was soon joined by other “Mutual Aid” and “Friendly Societies” aimed at organizing relations of mutual aid among workers, until by 1887
there were more than 1,600 consumer cooperatives active in England (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997: 10-13). In France in the same period, agricultural workers formed production cooperatives by pooling their resources to purchase the means of production, provide advances on future sales and stockpile products in communal warehouses; with the influx of socialist principles of collective production into the French government in the late 1840’s, these rural cooperatives were joined by *ateliers nationaux* (national workshops employing unemployed urban workers in small-scale public works) and constitutionally mandated state funding to promote cooperative businesses (ibid: 14).

These early associations provided a model for Italian cooperatives both in terms of form (e.g. the management and distribution of collective resources, internal decision-making) and philosophical principles (e.g. mutual aid, mutual benefit and using collective organization to work within capitalism to ameliorate its effects on individuals). The intense industrial development of the industrial revolution peaked in Italy in the second half of the Nineteenth century at the same time that the peninsula was rocked by political upheavals culminating in the unification of Italy in 1861 under a single monarchy. Previous to unification, the various monarchies that ruled the peninsula were distinctly inhospitable to associational forms and had actively suppressed the worker’s and apprenticeship guilds that had existed in multiple city-states in earlier periods (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997: 21).

In 1848, however, King Charles Albert established a constitution (commonly called the Albertine Statute) for the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia that included the legal and judicial conditions necessary to permit the development of associational life,
namely the right of individuals to gather together. This legislative shift accompanied the formation of an industrial working class and the deterioration of previous, artisanal forms of production at a time when the lack of social welfare legislation and the weakening of the ecclesiastical apparatus (which had provided some protection for workers and economically marginalized populations in the past) left workers vulnerable to the effects of market fluctuations or events such as disease and death in the family. It thus follows that the first associations in Italy, like in England, were aimed at protecting and organizing mutual aid among workers. Taking advantage of the relative freedom established by the new constitution, the first Italian consumers’ cooperative was established in the northern city of Turin in 1854 by a pan-association of multiple urban workers’ associations; two years later, a glass workers’ production cooperative was established in the province of Savona in the current-day Liguria region (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997: 22). At the time, both of these sites were part of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia.

When the kingdom was extended in 1861, the Albertine Statute became the constitution of the newly unified Kingdom of Italy and remained in force (though subsequently modified) until 1948. This legislation is important to the history of Italian associational life because it both enables free association and expresses the then-existing liberal state’s ambivalent stance on associational forms of organization. Specifically, Article 32 of the statute recognized “the right to gather peacefully and without arms…in
the interest of public concerns” (Ricotta 1999:56). It is important to note, however, that the newly established Italian state was shaped by the liberal-democratic political philosophies of the era. It granted certain rights and freedoms (mainly property rights and liberal-type “negative freedoms” such as the freedom of religion) but did not express any specific objectives regarding civil cohabitation or define relations between elements of society or between societal elements and the state. This characteristically liberal silence on communitarian questions reflects the monarchical state’s misgivings regarding forms of collective organization outside of the purview (and, potentially, the control) of the state itself. Article 32 therefore did not expressly grant individuals the right of association but only that of physically gathering, and in fact its very vagueness allowed a succession of governments during the end of the nineteenth century to adopt quite different policy lines in relation to associations (Ricotta 1999:57).

Under these more favorable conditions, many new associations were established. The 1862 census conducted right after unification counted 443 mutual aid societies (Ricotta 1997:57), more than half located in Piedmont but with concentrations also in Lombardy, Veneto, Emilia-Romagna and Tuscany (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997: 23). These organizations and their aims can be distinguished from the country’s pre-industrial (primarily religious) tradition of charitable works both in spirit (a religious obligation to beneficence on one side vs. an effort to actualize the liberal ideal of individual equality on the other) and in form ( largesse granted by the well-off to the needy vs. mutual and reciprocal aid between equals). At the same time, they were also different from the

\[^{2}\text{All translations from Italian are mine unless otherwise noted.}\]
professional guilds and urban artisanal associations that had preceded them in that, while those corporate professional organizations had been opposed to the free market and resisted the de-professionalization of work that accompanied industrialization, the new mutual aid societies were a direct product of this de-professionalization. While mutual aid societies did seek to ameliorate the effects of the free market on worker members, they did not oppose industrial capitalism per se (Ricotta 1997:58). In fact, in the decades directly following unification, key representatives of the Italian ruling classes and conservative political thinkers of the time encouraged and praised the growth of mutual aid societies because they were seen as a way to govern and peacefully integrate the urban working class, resolve antagonistic relations between classes and provide the social welfare necessary to maintain the labor pool without involving the state (Ricotta 1997:58).

Two main economic and legislative-political developments around the turn of the century came together to give this early cooperative movement a more politically radical orientation and, simultaneously, create the separation between Catholic and Socialist/Communist spheres that still exists today. The primary economic development was the Europe-wide agrarian crisis of the 1870s and 1880s, which began to seriously affect Italy in the mid-1880s. Prices for the foremost agricultural products of north-central Italy dropped drastically over the course of only a few years, overturning agricultural production and causing a crisis of unemployment especially among the

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3This politically neutral position of reform and amelioration of capitalism was a point of conflict between mutual aid societies of the time and the burgeoning Italian socialist movement, which viewed the focus on cooperation as a dangerous distraction from the struggle for socialist revolution (Ricotta 1999: 60).
braccianti or agricultural day laborers. While many braccianti (especially from the South) chose to leave Italy, a substantial number opted instead for class-based organizing and struggle.

As mentioned above, the deliberate ambiguity of the Albertine Statute regarding associational activity enabled different parliaments to treat the burgeoning cooperative sector according to the prevailing political climate. When these early free associations departed from a position of apolitical mutual aid and began to make explicit claims for workers’ rights and class empowerment, the state responded on one hand by passing more restrictive legislation governing their establishment and activities, and on the other hand by co-opting their functions through the establishment of the first government assistance programs for workers in cases of illness and injury as well as unemployment and maternity. This state provision of basic social welfare effectively drained many mutual aid societies of their reason for existing, thus separating reform-oriented threads of associationism from its more ideologically radical manifestations. Many associations dissolved, but those that were left represented a new generation of collective organization: highly politicized workers’ unions and leghe di resistenza (resistance leagues) (Ricotta 1997:59). Especially in the countryside and among agricultural workers, these associations became important spaces for organizing and diffusing the socialist-inspired class struggle that was sweeping northern and central Italy.

This associational growth spurt finally forced the Italian parliament to take a more explicit position in relation to associations in the form of a commercial code passed in 1889, which contains many of the elements of current law: it stated that cooperative
entities must distinguish themselves from conventional businesses by granting equal voting rights to members regardless of the extent of their participation. It prohibited sales of shares without permission of the members, required that cooperatives publicly release their balance books every year, and exempted cooperative entities from certain bureaucratic taxes. Although proponents of the cooperative movement at the time criticized the legislation for failing to valorize the principles of solidarity and democratic equality seen as characterizing cooperatives, the law did nonetheless grant associations an official place in the new nation’s economy (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997: 38-39).

At the same time, the process of Italian nation-building culminated in 1870 with the invasion of Rome by the troops of King Victor Emmanuel II, who transformed it from a Papal city-state to the nation’s capital. Pope Pius IX reacted by issuing a papal edict prohibiting the faithful from participating in the political life of the liberal state (Ricotta 1997:61). While liberal Catholics continued to support the state, more hardline Catholics instead focused on charitable social service provision (through rural funding organizations, cooperatives and professional associations and aid for women and children) and the resulting sphere of Catholic associations developed a strongly anti-socialist bent, aimed at opposing the spread of Socialism and Communism by stepping in to serve the daily needs of the working class (both rural and urban).  

4 This social and political rift was also given legal definition by the passage of an 1890 law on charitable organizations that legally distinguishes between secular, civil associations and the long tradition of “pious works” (Opere Pie, including orphanages, hospitals, schools and charitable funds for the needy) carried out by the Church since the middle ages. This law defines charitable organizations as those aimed at helping, educating, training or generally morally improving the poor, and specifically excludes from this category all “aid committees and other temporary institutions maintained through contributions by members” as well as “business and associations governed by the civil and commercial codes” (Legge 17 luglio 1890, n. 6972: articolo 2).
development of the Democratic Christian political thread eventually brought the Church into the realm of union organizing with a vengeance, the Catholic branch of the cooperative movement is still distinguished by its anti-socialist orientation and, as we see in David Kertzer’s (1980) portrait of a Bologna neighborhood a century later, this opposition between Catholic and politically leftist secular projects continues to represent a significant topographical feature in the map of Italian associational life.

By the turn of the century the Italian cooperative movement had both spread and diversified to the extent that it reflected the most prominent political-ideological and social-demographic populations of the time: pro-capitalism Liberals who were active in credit collectives and cooperative banks (banche populare) for urban shopkeepers and small businesses aimed at supporting and developing the new capitalist state; apolitical Catholics concentrated on credit cooperatives for urban small business owners and rural small landowners and social services for the unemployed and economically marginalized along the lines of the charitable organizations that had preceded them; and the continentally inspired Socialists focused on resistance leagues, radical workers unions and consumers’ cooperatives, especially in the northern Pianura Padana or Po Valley area. In Italy’s southern regions, in contrast, cooperatives of any kind (from production and consumption cooperatives to housing and credit associations) remained few and far between. Scholars of the time attributed this divergent development to the South’s greater

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5 Commonly called the Pianura Padana or Val Padana, the plains area that drains into the Po river is considered a distinctive geographical area of Italy and also shares a common socio-political and economic history to a large extent. It is defined to the west, north and northeast by the Alps, by the Adriatic Sea to the southeast and by the Apennine Mountains to the south; it includes the present-day regions of Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto and Friuli-Venezia Giulia.
socio-economic inequality and lack of an entrepreneurial class as well as the prevalence of latifondo or feudal-style land tenure by absentee landlords in the organization of southern agricultural production (in contrast to the mezzadria system common in the Center and North, in which the land owner and client farmer split the produce, a system conventionally involving mutual aid and labor exchange among client farmers and long-term, relatively reciprocal relationships between the peasants and their patron landlords) (Ricotta 1997:63). The uneven economic and socio-political development between southern and northern Italy is a prominent feature of the country’s history and continues to shape national politics, but my own tailored historical account necessarily focuses on the Pianura Padana where we find the Region of Emilia-Romagna and its capital city Bologna.

**Associations at the turn of the century and the “Red Biennial”**

Already at the turn of the century the Italian cooperative movement comprised significant contradictions or internal fault lines in relation to both the state and the capitalist economy. While on one hand the cooperative movement (and especially its more politically radical elements) represented a potential challenge to the state’s monopoly on power, the Italian state, even while it worked to concentrate power in the executive branch by for instance draining the effective power of the parliament and taking over social service institutions from the Church, continued legislative and political efforts to incorporate cooperative organizations into state structures so they could be used
to reproduce the labor pool and foster social stability (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997: 58).\textsuperscript{6}

Additionally, as the movement grew it continued to include both reform-oriented liberal threads bent on using cooperatives to ameliorate capitalism’s inherent instabilities as well as Socialist and Anarcho-syndicalist elements seeking to ignite the class struggle that would lead to revolution and/or free the working class from economic and cultural enslavement.

In the Po valley area and especially the region of Emilia-Romagna, the radical constituents of the movement came to the fore thanks to the pressure of mass unemployment and a political history of horizontally oriented labor organizing predating industrialization. With legislation pushed through by sympathetic figures in local municipal and regional government, workers cooperatives throughout the area were given government contracts to employ the masses of unemployed day laborers in large public works, from building railroads to reclaiming the land by draining the marshlands for farming and building dikes and irrigation canals. In addition to acting as the main intermediary between workers and the state by managing government funding and organizing work crews, the cooperatives also sought to meet the entirety of members’ basic needs through mass housing projects, consumers’ purchasing associations and medical services for worker members (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997: 41-54). When integrated together in a single space, these became the first Case del Popolo or People’s

\textsuperscript{6} As mentioned in note 1, these same contradictory forces have also been ascribed to the contemporary NGO and voluntary sector. See for example Paley 2001.
Houses. In the words of a prominent Socialist-turned-Anarchist of the time, these Case del Popolo represented the “center of a vast and powerful movement for the moral and intellectual elevation of the working man” (Umberto Postiglione, *Manifesto della Casa del Popolo* [1920], as quoted in Puglielli 2006: 63/4). By providing an integrated space of aggregation, recreation, education and social services, these spaces sought to develop and give visibility to the cooperative movement’s values of solidarity and collective organization; they were envisioned as the “greenhouses” wherein to cultivate a socialist ethic that would then spread to permeate the larger economy and civil society.

The spread of associations was not only tolerated but directly supported by the series of governments from 1901 to 1914. Whereas the liberal state had at best failed to hamper the cooperative sector, these governments encouraged them as part of the Prime Minister’s plans to promote industrialization and modernization through the partial nationalization of economic production. With the advent of WWI, the government ended up using the network of consumers’ cooperatives to furnish the population with subsidized food and control the price hikes and speculation that otherwise would have prevailed in a period of scarcity (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997: 102). The war thus contributed to the growth of the Italian cooperative sector as much as it did industrial

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7 These structures were especially widespread and active from the turn of the century to the 1970s, after which many were closed or converted to other functions. Having been constructed through collective labor organized by the Partito Communista Italiano (PCI), the buildings belonged to the party and, when the PCI split, they were inherited by the Partito dei Democratici di Sinistra (PDS). To cover its debts, in the late 1990s the PDS sold many of these pieces of real estate on the commercial market (Associazione Primo Moroni n.d.: La Storia).

8 Commonly referred to as the Giolittian period after multi-term Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti.
production in general, and the number of associations in Italy grew almost tenfold in two decades, from 2,000 in 1900 to 21,500 by 1921 (Ricotta 1997: 62).

After WWI, however, an economic downturn rapidly transformed the political contours of the country. Spurred on by the Bolshevik revolution, from 1919-1920 workers throughout northern and central Italy staged an intense and increasingly militarized class struggle – dubbed the “Red Biennial” by historians – involving large-scale strikes and the occupation of both factories and farmland along with some initial attempts at autogestione (self-management), and violent clashes among workers, owners and anti-socialist elements. Much organizing and politicization took place through the unions (membership in the pan-union confederation CGdL [Confederazione Generale del Lavoro] rose from 321,000 before war to 2,200,00 in 1919 (Tasca 1995: 158), but cooperatives and associations also played an important part, especially in the countryside, through Camere di Lavoro and Case del Popolo located in even the smallest villages (Degl’Innocenti 1990:21/22). Socialist candidates enjoyed significant victories in local elections in 1919, even taking the majority in cities and towns in the regions of Tuscany and Emilia (Tasca 1995:183), and the braccianti or manual day laborers developed a highly organized system for managing the labor pool to divide working days and earnings

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9 The Camere del Lavoro (literally Work Rooms) are organizational centers for the Italian labor movement that started in 1895 and flourished until the rise of fascism. They were originally intended to coordinate the work of all local unions in a given municipality within a common structure of governance and serve the needs of individual unions and workers, for instance by helping laborers find work and negotiate with employers, or by organizing labor in a particular area so that wage-labor-hours were equally divided among workers. Like the Case del Popolo, these centers were seen by their socialist and anarcho-syndicalist founders as sites for not only logistical organization but also the development and diffusion of economic and cultural emancipation. Camere di Lavoro still exist in most Italian cities, but they currently simply serve as the headquarters of the local union chapters and dispense advice and services for workers and small business owners in dealing with tax law, commercial legal codes, etc.
between them; in this system, large landowners and mass contracts were more suited to
the worker’s needs, whereas small landowners and mezzadri were seen as a threat to the
delicate distribution of labor days among workers. In addition, whereas before the war
the workers had demanded concessions from the state in the form of public works and
price protections, the global economic crisis of the post-war period made price protection
impossible and the workers turned to instead demand a share of profit from the
landowners (Tasca 1995: 190-200).

The growing workers’ movement thus threatened multiple interests: the urban
bourgeoisie concerned about violent unrest, factory owners forced to make
unprecedented concessions to the unions, large rural landowners seeking to hold onto
their profit, and small landowners marginalized by the day laborers’ system of
organization. In addition, the cosmopolitan-leaning socialist values championed by the
workers were seen as an insult to Italian nationalist elements that had supported WWI.
All of these forms of fear and resentment were used by early Fascists to garner support
for their nationalist, authoritarian platform. In 1921, the Fascists made their grab for
power through the use of violent raids by armed paramilitary squads.10 The armed
squadrs began by targeting local leftist party headquarters as well as leftist associations

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10 These squads were initially formed by the survivors of elite storm-trooper units active during the war, such as the famous “Arditi” (Daring Ones). Having returned en masse to a country struggling under an economic crisis, the former soldiers, unemployed and marginalized from the class structure, organized themselves together with urban intellectuals in pursuit of social and economic reform (shorter work days, earlier retirement, abolition of the bishopric system and replacement of the army with a people’s militia). Despite sharing some economic principles, they opposed the socialists and their projects because the socialists, having criticized Italy’s position in the war and generally remained unenthusiastic about the victory over Austria-Hungary, were seen as traitors to the soldiers’ nationalist ideology. According to Mussolini, the “squadrista” soon numbered 300,000 and formed the core of the paramilitary force that marched on Rome on October 28th, 1922 to force the King to hand over power.
and cooperatives: organized in urban centers, these squads were sent out into the countryside to attack specific organizations known to host Socialist organizing. They targeted “the headquarters of the camera del lavoro, the union, the cooperatives and the casa del popolo, breaking down the doors, throwing the furniture, books and supplies out into the street, pouring barrels of gasoline: within minutes, all was devoured by the flames. (…) The expeditions often departed with a specific aim, that of ‘cleaning’ the area. The trucks therefore stopped right in front of the headquarters of the ‘red’ organizations slated for destruction” (Tasca 1995: 202). Italo Balbo, Fascist organizer and heir apparent to Mussolini, wrote in his diary that it was necessary to act against the cooperatives “with the same spirit one attacks the storehouses of the enemy in times of war” (Garotti 1990: 37).

In the interests of containing the rise of Socialism and labor unrest, Prime Minister Giolitti provided tacit approval in the form of not interfering with this rise of the Fascist movement (De Felice 2002:12), and the campaign of squadrist violence enabled the Fascists to take over key positions in local administration and gain widespread support among both urban capitalists and intellectuals (Liberals, Futurists and anti-socialist Unionists) as well as rural landowners, which contributed to the success of their subsequent bid for control of the state. The Fascist movement thus began as a network of nationalist paramilitary groups engaged in widespread political violence at the local level

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11 The original quote is as follows: *Ci si precipita alla sede della Camera del lavoro, del sindacato, della cooperativa, alla Casa del popolo, si sfondono le porte, si buttano nella strada i mobili, i libri, le merci, si versano dei bidoni di benzina: qualche minuto dopo, tutto è in preda alle fiamme … Piu spesso, la spedizione parte con uno scopo preciso, quello di ‘ripulire’ il luogo. I camion si arrestano allora proprio davanti le sedi delle organizzazioni ‘rosse’ che vengono distrutte* (Tasca 1995: 202).
which was then harnessed by the champions of an authoritarian ideology into a mass protest (the “March on Rome”) that forced the ruling monarch to hand over control of the state; this initially extra-legal move was subsequently granted political and legal legitimacy through national elections.

**Associations under the Fascist state: dissolution and co-optation**

In 1922 the Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party) formed the first cabinet under Benito Mussolini, a coalition of Liberals, Catholics and representatives of the more moderate branches of the Fascist Party. The party already enjoyed widespread support among the nationalist right wing, business class and military, and sought to consolidate their power by incorporating the interests of the Church, monarchy and labor unions. As part of this effort, the Fascist Party proposed a corporate model of social and economic organization, an alternative to both Communism and liberal capitalism in which the forces of production would be organized through unified, well-defined collective organizations that, under the absolute control of the authoritarian state, would manage production while pacifying class conflict. Efforts to subdue the Communist movement therefore continued through legislative and political means; all anti-fascist political parties and non-regime newspapers were dissolved and a 1926 law outlawed the strike and mandated that only “legally recognized” (i.e. Fascist) unions had the right to engage in collective bargaining (Ricotta 1997:64).

Whereas previous governments had alternatively repressed or encouraged associations as a sphere outside the state, the Fascist Party engaged in a wholesale co-
optation aimed at bringing all pre-existing associations and organizations under the state’s public security authorities. In 1925 the Lega delle Cooperative was dissolved and in its place the state created the Ente Nazionale Fascista per La Cooperazione to harness the networked organizations of the cooperative movement to the task of stabilizing and reproducing the relationship between the regime and the masses. To better permeate the fabric of everyday life and socialize the population in the prevailing nationalist ideology, the government incorporated the after-work leisure/recreational associations for workers that had survived squadrist raids and established new ones, often in the same buildings and rooms previously used by the Socialist and Anarchist associations.\textsuperscript{12} These circoli focused on traditional social activities such as choirs, musical bands and bocce (a kind of lawn bowling) (Ricotta 1997:65).

Despite these moves, however, cooperative economic practices were not central to the Fascist rhetoric of work nor were they well integrated into the Fascist model of the relationship between labor and capital; in fact, cooperation appears nowhere in the Fascist Carta del Lavoro policy document. Furthermore, the main examples of cooperative organization that were promoted and maintained were the rural agrarian consortiums, which historians of the cooperative movement identify as more bureaucratic and subordinated to the interests of (agrarian) capital than any other cooperative entities present at the time. This cautious treatment makes sense given that the conceptualization of mass cooperative and democracy fueling the cooperative movement potentially

\textsuperscript{12} The OND (Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro or National After-work Institution) was founded in 1925 to manage the many worker’s leisure-time associations established and co-opted by the state (Ricotta 1997: 66).
conflicted with the corporatist principles underlying the Fascists’ reorganization of economic production. The state’s absorption of cooperatives and related manifestations of the coop movement therefore represented more of a strategic effort to consolidate power and construct the tools for building hegemony than a valorization of cooperation per se.

Given the strong association between the coop movement and Socialist/Communist struggle, cooperatives and civic associations represented natural sites for the aggregation of anti-fascist sentiment during the regime. Some historians have argued that these collective entities resisted wholesale and effective incorporation into the Fascist apparatus because they could not be separated from their democratic roots (Garotti 1990:42); at any rate, despite the party’s success in allying with some of the labor unions, it was recognized that the regime had failed to incorporate the more politicized elements of the working class, a fact that was only underlined by the worker-led assassination attempt against Mussolini during a visit to Bologna in 1926. Legal repression and the removal of movement leaders superficially “cleaned” the cooperatives but anti-fascist organizing continued underground; in many cases, ex-cooperative members formed the core of the underground partisan resistance movement, especially in the PO valley (Fornasari and Zamagni 1997:145, Garotti 1990:42). In 1944, while the Nazi party installed its puppet government to prop up the failing Fascist state, the Italian resistance movement staged an uprising behind Nazi lines and began establishing

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13 Furthermore, despite rigid regulation of gender roles under the Fascist state, the war gave many women the opportunity (in Italy as elsewhere) to take on previously male roles in production and waged labor, leading to a significant female contribution to this resistance movement (Rothenberg 2006:285).
provisional local governments. The cooperative structures were among the first local institutions to be re-established, for both practical reasons (to recover resources) as well as for the symbolic and ideological value of legitimizing the resistance movement by asserting its connection to these symbols of popular democracy, solidarity and mutual aid (Albertazzi 1990: 47).

**Associations and political parties in the post-war boom years**

After the war, three main parties were represented in the new Italian parliament: the centrist/liberal Christian Democrats (DC, founded in 1942), the Soviet-linked Italian Communist Party (Partito Communista Italiano or PCI, founded in 1921 dissolved/reformulated in 1991) and the more reform-oriented Italian Socialist Party (PSI, established 1892 and disbanded 1994). The nationalist Right, represented by the Movimento Sociale Italiano (Italian Social Movement) party, held only 2% and was effectively excluded from parliamentary decision-making processes. The Communist PCI and Socialist PSI, in contrast, made a strong showing in the 1946 general elections, but burgeoning Cold War fears of Soviet influence motivated the Truman-led US government to intervene in the 1948 elections (especially through propaganda targeting

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14 More specifically, the PSI had been divided since the turn of the century between the Reform branch, active in the unions and parliament, and the “Maximalist” branch that was part of a London-based international consortium of Leftist socialist parties. Mussolini came to head this Maximalist branch and it was a mainstay of power for the rising fascist movement; when Mussolini’s supporters won at the party convention in 1912, the party split along pro-fascist and non-fascist lines. This split was further exacerbated during WWI in that more internationally oriented orthodox socialists opposed what they spurned as a “bourgeois” war while nationalist, corporatist-oriented socialists pushed for Italian liberation from Austria and corporatist economic and political reform. This nationalist branch went on to provide popular support for the National Fascist Party when it was established in 1921.
the Italo-American electorate) in opposition to the left coalition, which ensured a DC victory (Ginsborg 1990:115-116).

Civic associations and cooperatives, politically legitimized and valorized through their link to the resistance movement, were explicitly promoted by the new state: when the Republican constitution came into force in 1948, it granted unambiguous recognition of both the right and the value of association in multiple instances, the most explicit being Article 45 in which the state recognizes the “social function” of all cooperation that seeks to further mutual aid rather than private interests, and pledges to promote this cooperation through all appropriate means; this recognition of cooperative entities reflected the broader value granted to social rights and the working class in the new constitution. As Article 1 declares, “Italy is a republic founded on labor.”

However, while the state may have recognized its workers, the workers didn’t necessarily return the favor. The pre-Fascist Liberal state had been distant and precarious, balancing monarchical and foreign interests alongside domestic ones, while the Fascist state had consolidated power through a mix of politically channeled welfare provision and totalitarian social control, a combination that encouraged wary distance and/or passivity in citizens rather than active democratic participation; it is thus widely agreed that the post-war Italian electorate was unused to a political tradition of democracy and, with totalitarian abuses still fresh in the collective memory, resistant to the development of a strong executive branch. Thanks to a history of local-level labor and political organizing as well as the diffused network of Catholic charity work, Italy’s republican
masses were loyal to “democratic institutions (parties, trade unions, etc.) but not to the democratic state” (Salvati 2003: 562, italics in the original).

Into this political void moved the mass parties, Catholic and Communist, which gained influence by offering “the feeling of belonging to a large, integrated institution and to its protective network of relief organizations” (Salvati 2003: 562). While the Church already enjoyed a ready-made network of locally rooted institutions, the Communist party (PCI) had to construct its own network. Overturning the previous Fascist co-optation of leftist spaces, the PCI took over the Fascist network of leisure clubs and socio-cultural centers; the Case del Fascio were thus transformed (or turned back into) leftist Case del Popolo and local party offices (re)converted to PCI use (Salvati 2003: 563). Organized labor also saw the potential in these recreational associations, and militant members of the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) union focused on gaining places in the national administration and governance of these circoli in order to influence their political development (Sorlini 1978:26).

While the Fascist government had treated the sphere of cooperatives and civic and recreational associations as a potential threat to state power, after the war the primary mass parties and labor unions treated it as a (political) resource in their maneuvering for social and political influence outside of state structures. In a move to wrest more control of these leftist organizations from the national administrative authority Ente Nazionale Assistenza Lavoratori (ENAL, the post-war incarnation of the Fascist state’s Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro) that was controlled by the state and thus the DC-headed coalition of the time, in 1956 the left parties established a national administrative organization
called Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana (the Italian Recreational and Cultural Association or ARCI) to unite all the local circoli, Case del Popolo and mutual aid societies that shared leftist ideals of democratic solidarity and anti-fascism (Sorlini 1978:26).

A new generation and political left: cultural and political dissent overflows institutional confines

At this point my historical account turns a corner: rather than following associations and cooperative entities, which represent a relatively structured and institutional form of collective extra-parliamentary political and civic participation, I begin to instead follow an upsurge of collective activity, often referred to as Italian Antagonismo (Antagonism) or Autonomismo (Autonomism) that originated within but subsequently departed from institutionalized structures. Italian Autonomism was fueled by a new generation of the political Left, a young, militarized, conflict-seeking thread of political culture that was not simply extra-parliamentary but deliberately autonomous from the leftist mass parties (and their singular focus on class struggle), and which found

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15 The ARCI network remains active today and has become the largest national network of local cultural associations. It currently includes organizations from Italy’s main institutionalized LGBTQ organization, Arcigay, to community theater groups, live concert venues and coffee shops.

16 In my experience, these terms are used by both participants and historians somewhat interchangeably, their use linked more to the argument being made than the phenomena being referred to. For instance, participants often use ‘antagonism’ to put emphasis on the generation of conflict as a political stance and strategy as in the case of the Bologna-based radical queer group Antagonismo Gay. Georgy Katsiaficas (2006), in his study of ‘European Autonomous Social Movements’, insists on the terms autonomous and autonomism to indicate the fact that, though heterogeneous and non-unified, the upsurge of collective action in 1960s and 70s Italy was distinguished by a counter-cultural and anti-systemic orientation that rendered it antithetical to and autonomous from established political structures (mass parties, state institutions, etc). In Italian, activists do frequently use the terms autonomia or autonomismo as convenient umbrellas to designate a variety of extra-institutional movements and tendencies, but it would be unhelpful to consider either of these terms as indicating a specific, temporally delimited social movement or group; rather, both antagonism and autonomism indicate a stance that has taken somewhat different shapes at different political moments, though with some aspects shared over time.
expression through occupation, experiments in self-governance and oppositional cultural production in close contact with mass media (radio, newspapers and magazines) and more globalized cultural flows. Although drawing heavily on Marxist and Leninist threads, this emergent Autonomist movement distinguished itself through the 1970s by also insisting on connections between issues and struggles – from patriarchal gender relations to the restrictions of established bourgeoisie culture – and by its antagonism towards compromise or reform-oriented positions; in this sense we can recognize in Autonomism the demographic, cultural and political elements that gave rise to occupied, self-managed social centers (CSOA).

Multiple demographic, cultural and economic factors contributed to the rise of Italian Autonomism, which I outline by drawing on Stephen Gundle’s detailed study of the Communist Party’s relationship to youth culture (2000) and Georgy Katsiaficas’ comprehensive account of Autonomous movements in European (1997). The post-war “boom years” in Italy were characterized by rapid urbanization and economic growth as the mechanization of agriculture sent waves of workers into the cities looking for work in the new factories being built there. With the rise of mass media technologies, the generation coming of age after the war was surrounded as never before by burgeoning cultural industries catering to youth. Through television to films, radio and the pop music industry, young people were encouraged to develop activities, interests and values that distinguished them from older people as a distinct demographic population (Gundle 2000: 108-110). More generally, increasing economic prosperity, expansion of municipal social services and diversification of free time choices permitted by the rise of
new cultural industries resulted in declining participation in the recreational circles and mutual aid associations (Gundle 1995: 271) that had been the mainstay of the institutional Left’s influence in people’s daily lives.

The Italian Communist Party (PCI) sought to use its network of associational spaces (as well as established tools such as the party’s youth organization) to take a leadership position in this mushrooming sphere of youth culture, but the phenomena (and the young people involved) appeared to slip through its fingers: during the 1950s and 60s, membership in the PCI’s youth organization declined, and fewer and fewer young people participated in the local, yearly festa dell’unità (festival of unity) events; when they did attend, it was only for nighttime dances rather than the more explicitly ideological debates and presentations during the day. There seemed to be a breakdown in the PCI’s dialogue with young people – older party members regularly criticized youth-oriented popular culture (especially originating in the USA) and young people, for their part, demonstrated their dissatisfaction by looking elsewhere for social and leisure activities (Gundle 2000: 112-113).

17 Dating from directly after WWII, the Festa D’Unita (Festival of Unity) was originally used to fund the PCI’s main newspaper, called L’Unita (Unity). Although the PCI as such dissolved in 1991 after the fall of the Berlin wall, the events continued to be organized under the succession of Center-Left mass parties that took the PCI’s place. These events are organized and run by party members and sympathetic volunteers in all local towns and cities where the main Center-Left party enjoys a significant following among the electorate but open to anyone and offer significant visibility to the party and its ideas. They usually include debates and book presentations, concerts and food stalls, usually featuring local specialties as well as (as I observed in Bologna in recent years) international cuisine such as Argentinean, Cuban and North African food.

18 Party disdain for new mass media and pop cultural spheres was not uniform, however; Gundle describes various efforts by the PCI to valorize Italian national cinema (at least the segment of it not oriented toward massification and commercial profit) and to bring alternative content onto the RAI TV stations (2000: 270-275).
While participation in traditional PCI activities declined, the ARCI network was more successful in responding to new cultural and leisure time trends. Adopting a more autonomous and innovative approach in line with emerging counter-cultural tendencies, the ARCI network offered jazz music nights, theatrical performances and film screenings as well as courses, conferences and seminars aimed at enabling worker-members to debate and understand their historical position (Gundle 1995: 296/7). While ARCI had been established in the 1950s in connection with the PCI, its new approach represented an explicit alternative to the established PCI line and so served to differentiate ARCI and its events from the Communist party and its events rather than bringing this emerging sphere of youth culture under PCI influence.

Italian Autonomism, the counter-culture, anti-institutional leftist movement that was emerging outside of the mass parties, was fueled by protesting students, struggling urban workers and a burgeoning feminist movement. Although problems of poverty, rural unemployment, and the presence of *latifondo* feudal-style relations in land tenure in southern Italy had been among the new government’s first priorities after the war, the proposed land reform failed to bring significant improvements and the 50s and 60s saw a mass migration of unskilled and semi-skilled workers from south to north (Salvati 2003: 566). Thanks to economic growth, there was nearly full employment in northern cities, which gave the workers the leverage they needed to make demands for higher wages and shorter work weeks. As these struggles gained momentum, however, they broke away from the conventional form and focus of labor organizing. White-collar workers joined factory workers and, in addition to primarily economic demands, they began to call into
question the governance structure that the party-backed unions had established to
administer the workforce as a political resource, as well as to make claims for
recognition-oriented entitlements such as respect and valorization (Katsiaficas
2006:18/9). In many cases, workers simply went over the heads of union leaders to make
decisions through a general assembly format, “making free use of the foremen’s
telephones to communicate inside factories” (ibid:20) and using the factory floor as a
space of political organizing with their allies, office workers and politicized university
students. In particular, the 1973 occupation of the Mirafiori factory in Turin by Fiat
automobile workers represented a shift in the Italian labor struggle from action led by
parties and unions to autonomous, extra-institutional struggle, or autonomia operaia
(workers’ autonomy) (Balestrini and Moroni 1997).

University students were also an important demographic. Following a series of
public education reforms, university enrollment was at an all-time high in Italy in the
1960s -70s. There was a push to graduate intellectual professionals (doctors, lawyers, and
teachers) but a lack of corresponding job opportunities, which gave rise to an
unprecedented number of highly educated yet unemployed young people. Facing a
gaping chasm between expectations and reality, the capitalist-subordinated university
system was the first target of students’ discontent. Like workers, students’ demands
focused on autonomy from existing power structures and their methodology centered on
mass meetings and non-hierarchical decision making processes. Militarized and
politicized through opposition to the Vietnam War and inspired by the dramatic May
1968 strikes and occupations in Paris, students soon left the university to join workers
outside the factory gates. This protest activity peaked in the so-called *autunno caldo* (hot autumn) of 1969 with a massive series of strikes involving 5.5 million workers, more than 25% of the country’s workforce, which brought production to a standstill in the factories and industrial centers of northern Italy (Katsicas 2006: 18).

The third element of this emerging Autonomism, often neglected in accounts of the period, was the Italian feminist movement. Perhaps even more than male workers and students, Italian women had reason to protest their lack of representation by existing political structures. Despite rigid regulation of gender roles under the Fascist state, in Italy as elsewhere the war offered many women the opportunity to take on previously male roles in production and waged labor, leading to increased public sphere participation and corresponding citizenship demands. However, in the effort to gain legitimacy after the war, both Socialist and Communist parties (the only ones who had been sympathetic to the demands of first-wave feminism in Italy) had tabled debate on gender issues in the post war era; the PCI, additionally motivated by the aim of maintaining working class unity, defined the women’s place as central to the family and dismissed anti-clericalism as a bourgeoisie concern, thus suppressing internal debate in favor of following the Vatican’s direction on divorce, birth control and abortion (Rothenberg 2006:285-286, see also Birnbaum 1986).

Female students were active from the very beginning in student protests but, when they found themselves relegated to administrative roles in movement activities, branched off to form more specifically feminist-oriented groups (such as *Rivolta Feminile* and *Lotta Femminista*) to carry out collective projects such as women’s centers, consciousness
raising groups and libraries (Katsificas 2006: 28). The cultural products of these groups, such as the *Lotta Feminista* magazine for women, appealed to more radical readers and rendered obsolete publications such as the magazine of the PCI’s women’s group that had been popular in earlier periods (Rothenberg 2006:300). At first Italian feminists were focused on abortion rights, divorce reform and unpaid labor in the home, but feminist struggle soon grew to encompass a more profound critique of bourgeoisie norms and the values of the patriarchal nuclear family (Katsificas 2006: 32/3).

Two main features distinguished Italian feminism from American, British and French traditions which are salient for our account here: a focus on sexual difference and an insistence on autonomy from institutions. Rather than sexual equality, Italian feminist groups sought “the achievement of radical change through privileging the positive values embedded in women’s difference” (Beccalli 1994:95). Conceptualizing sexual difference as women’s embodied knowledge and the meaning-making this gives rise to, Italian feminists rejected traditional conceptualizations of equal rights within existing structures as a misguided, dead-end project of “masculinization” that sought to subordinate women’s ways of being into an essentially androcentric framework in which women could, at best, represent inferior, second-class men (Plesset 2006: 57). In keeping with this valorization of difference, they refused to work within institutions (mass parties, associations, universities) and instead formed countless small, independent groups throughout the country; even their publications were group-authored (ibid: 55/6). This feminist rejection of gendered subordination *within* the leftist movement and associated insistence on horizontal social relations and non-hierarchical forms of decision making
significantly shaped the form and methods of the autonomist movement, while feminist critiques of hegemonic, gendered cultural values also shaped the movement’s political foci.

It should be clear by now that this period of animated political dissent was also a moment of crisis for the established political Left in which protest activity escaped their control and institutions, their analyses were judged irrelevant and extra-party elements took the fore. In addition to rejecting the new, more globalized youth culture, the PCI was also unable to meet the political and social needs of the highly informed and politicized young people who were more interested in unstructured debates among peers and the high octane protests than highly structured, hierarchically rigid party activities and the laborious daily work of reproducing the institutions the PCI; instead of leading leftist intellectual, social and political life, the party was left scrambling to catch up (Gundle 1995: 262/3). The largest strikes in this period were organized by dissenting (non-PCI) elements within the left and, while the PCI continued to promote the idea of cross-class alliances for the common good, factory floor organizers were pushing for grass-roots control of production and rejecting and move toward political compromise, the state and bourgeoisie democracy (Gundle 1995: 264/5). The social protest

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19 Multiple far-Left activist groups formed in this period, in opposition to the main unions and mass parties (as well as each other), each with their own newspapers and/or leaflet distribution networks and bases of operation. Among the more active were Lotta Continua (Continuous Struggle) and Potere Operaio (Workers’ Power), whose leaders included Franco Berardi aka Bifo of Radio Alice, the well-known social theorist Antonio Negri, and Valerio Morucci, who went on to participate in the Brigate Rosse (Red Brigades) in the late 1970s and was later imprisoned for the murder of then-DC president Aldo Moro, which occurred in 1978. A loose network of local groups, called Autonomia Operaia (Workers’ Autonomy), took the place of Potere Operaio as the radical labor movement shifted away from Marxism-Leninism and towards autonomism (in this case, a focus on the liberation of subjectivity through anti-institutional practices of everyday self-governance) over the course of the late 1970s.
movements of the late 1960s and 70s thus made way for autonomous, extra-institutional political participation in that they fundamentally disrupted the “two subcultures” of Communist and Catholic political allegiance, opening multiple arenas for collective action and political engagement that were not mutually exclusive (Diani 1992:211).

Though my focus here is on the politically left thread of youth culture that gave rise to CSOA, it is important to note that young people on the far Right carried out a similar critique of existing democratic institutions and push for the development of autonomous forms of political engagement in the 1970s. This was partly motivated by their perception of not finding representation in electoral politics. In the formation of the “historic compromise” between the PCI and the DC in the early 1970s, the MSI and the far Right more broadly provided a foil against which the Center and Right parties found unity; furthermore, following a bombing in 1974 that was believed to be linked to neo-fascist elements, the far Right was linked to criminal violence in the public sphere and lost a great deal of its legitimacy (Di Tullio 2006:15). In a parallel of developments on the political Left, young people who felt unrepresented by democratic structures sought to carry forward their own nationalist, populist political struggles outside of the parliamentary system, through collective organizations and activity outside of mass party control. The group Lotta Studentesca (Student Struggle) emerged in 1976, with a periodical called *Per la Terza Posizione* (For the Third Position, referring to a position neither Stalinist nor reactionary), promoting a militarized form of nationalism opposed to both Soviet and American imperialism, capitalism, and the repressive Italian state (see for example Adinolfi and Fiore 2000).
Free Radio and the “creative wing” of the autonomist movement

While student protests ebbed in the USA and other European countries after ’68, in Italy the combined student-worker-feminist movement continued to agitate and develop through the 1970s. A series of embattled, unstable governments responded to the widespread unrest with hasty reforms in the judicial system, public housing, the health system, taxation, and welfare (Salvati 2003: 569), but protest continued and moved from factories and universities to city squares and government buildings with periodic peaks involving dramatic and increasingly militant strikes and mass protests. Most interesting for our purposes here, this second wave of protest had a strong creative element that inspired various forms of politicized cultural expression. For instance, the magazine *Re Nudo* (Naked King), one of the vast array of counter-cultural newspapers and magazines that spring up in the late 1960s and early 70s, organized a giant “young proletariat party” at a park near Milan. This party, often dubbed “the Italian Woodstock,” celebrated the themes most dear to *Re Nudo*, such as rock and jazz music, free sexuality, soft drugs and overall individual emancipation from conventional social norms. Participants went on to form an informal group of cultural “guerillas” who the press dubbed the Indiani Metropolitan (Metropolitan Indians) for the way they painted their faces and donned feathers in an ironic occupation of the ‘Other’ role of Native Americans in Italy’s popular Spaghetti Western cinematic tradition. Rather than contest institutional political issues, the Metropolitan Indians agitated in terms of cultural politics, focusing on issues
fundamental to Italian culture such as patriarchal family values and norms of respectable self-representation.

After a 1976 legal decision repealed the state’s former monopoly of the airwaves, there was also an explosion of new radio and TV stations (800 new radio stations and 20 new TV stations in the first year alone) (Katsiaficas 2006:41). Feminists, radical leftist groups and counter-cultural music fans started their own “free” or “pirate” radio stations that sought to act as carriers of “free communication” and transform the technology of radio into an instrument of young people’s cultural, moral and political liberation (Lualdi 2005). One such pirate radio station, Radio Alice of Bologna, used irony and a ludic approach to pursue the wholesale “rejection of professionalism” (Lualdi 2005) and attack institutionalized societal norm and bourgeois values. Radio Alice also hosted the first radio show in Italy to broadcast live call-ins by listeners as part of the founders’ intention to enable absolute freedom of expression and democratize control of the means of cultural production (ibid). The founders of Radio Alice championed a philosophical

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20 Until 1976, the main radio stations in Italy were those of the RAI network (originally Radio Audizioni Italiane [Italian Radio Auditions], which provided the acronym that is still used to refer to the network, although the modern title is Radiotelevisione italiana S.p.A, in which the S.p.A stands for Società per Azioni, indicating a publically traded company) which is controlled by the Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance. The other main station in the early 1970s was “Radio Monte Carlo,” which started in 1966 as a part a French-based network, the Radio Monte Carlo Network, and then established an Italian-specific station when its Italian language programming grew popular enough to support one. Given that its towers were located on foreign soil, Radio Monte Carlo was not subject to the same governmental oversight as the RAI channels and, while the RAI censored certain musical groups and specific songs, Radio Monte Carlo played everything that was popular; in addition, deejays and presenters on the station used a more informal, youth-oriented style of communication, which soon garnered a large following among Italian young people. In 1976 the Italian Supreme Constitutional Court ruled the state’s radio and television monopoly to be illegitimate and recognized the right of private (i.e. non-state, which also included non-profit stations) providers to transmit in their local areas (Lualdi 2005).

21 Specifically, this concept of liberation built on the work of German philosopher Herbert Marcuse and his assertion that the established social-political order should not be conceptualized as immutable but rather one possibility among others, and thus subject to transformation (as paraphrased in Lualdi 2005).
approach that conceptualized every part of the social-political-economic system as
constricting individual human liberty and thus sought to create an alternative that was
utterly (or to the greatest possible extent) unstructured, unplanned and uncensored;
spurning Marx and Lenin, they staged live readings of Max Horkheimer, Theodor
Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse as well as experimental literature and poetry. Félix
Guattari, who was friends with one of the founders of the station and wrote about Italian
free radio in several articles, identified Radio Alice as the site of what he terms a
“molecular revolution” that was taking form despite, or in the face of, the state’s
increasingly repressive project of manufacturing consent in the late 1970s (Guattari
1980).

Two specific aspects of Radio Alice activity clearly prefigure, in a more spatially
diffused and thus less practice-based manner, the form of political engagement
subsequently enacted in Italian social centers. First, Radio Alice founders proposed their
own version of direct communicative democracy by encouraging anyone who wished to
take the microphone and to speak in any manner they liked. In direct contrast with the
formal, intellectual rhetorical style of the RAI stations, Radio Alice challenged dominant
notions of the public sphere that made professionalism and respectability a prerequisite
for being heard and/or speaking publically about issues of common concern. Indeed,
Guattari argued that Radio Alice represented a revolution at the level of subjectivity in
that, rather than simply shifting the terrain or actor of struggle (from workers/the
Communist party to students or queer people/the free radio), it actually enabled a variety
of socially, politically and culturally excluded subjects to come together in a non-
institutionalizable site, one that could not be incorporated into the state apparatus; Radio Alice was an example of “a conjunction of sexual, relational, esthetic and scientific revolutions all making cross-overs, markings and currents of deterritorialisation” (Guattari 1980: 236).

Second, the station was directly connected to political protest activity. For instance, during clashes between police and protesters in March of 1977, protesters called in to the station to report on ongoing events as they occurred, and announcers used the radio to inform listeners where the police forces and student-constructed barricades were located or where the most violent clashes were taking place (Lualdi 2005). Through this play-by-play account of ongoing protest activity, the station used the immediacy and interactive potential of the radio medium to link multiple, geographically dispersed actors (listeners, people in the studio and participants on the street) and create a connection between the actions they all carried out in the unfolding events.

**Autoriduzione, occupation and the emergence of CSOA**

When oil prices exploded in the early 1970s and inflation skyrocketed in Italy (as elsewhere), the Italian government was, according to its critics, caught without a cohesive economic policy response (see for instance Cherki and Wieviorka 1980). Industrial and financial sector leaders stepped in with a plan, passed by the parliament in June 1974,
aimed at reducing public expenditures and passing the cost of the economic crisis onto the working class and public-sector consumers in general. Specifically, the so-called Carli plan (named after the longtime director of the national Banca d’Italia, Guido Carli) involved price increases of approximately 50% in transportation, housing, electricity and health care (Cherki and Wieviorka 1980:72/3). In addition to their shocking magnitude, these increases were distinctive in that they targeted the basic consumption areas of the working class, which at that time constituted more than half of the Italian population.

In an unprecedented extension of the Italian labor struggle into the realm of consumption, people in many areas of the country responded by choosing to pay what they could afford or deemed reasonable for these essentials. Workers in many cities auto-reduced their rent and electricity bills (Katsiaficas 2006: 22). In Turin, when transportation costs were raised 20 - 50% overnight, masses of commuting factory workers collectively circumvented the price increase by paying the old price to a union delegate who in return gave out union-produced receipts for the auto-reduced bus passes (Cherki and Wieviorka 1980:74). These actions were organized through and with the support of the local industrial unions, who enjoyed relative autonomy from their national leadership; the Communist party, in contrast, joined the government in opposing the movement from the beginning, declaring that “workers don’t break the law” (Katsiaficas 2006:22).

By 1976 the auto-reduction movement had spilled into the realm of leisure. In Bologna, for instance, young activists took it into their hands to auto-reduce the price of movie and concert tickets as well as restaurant meals under the slogan “enough with the
poverty, we want to get our hands on the wealth” (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011:38).

Auto-reduction of commercial goods and services brought activists into conflict with the police, with mixed results: while participants in the Turin movement describe police immediately arresting militants who auto-reduced grocery store merchandise (Cherki and Wieviorka 1980:77), Bologna protesters reportedly responded in mass to police efforts to block auto-reduction actions, and thus were able to avoid arrest (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011:39). In relation to state services, on the other hand, so many people participated in the action that it was difficult to repress through existing tools of governance.22 The large-scale, worker-based foundation of the movement was finally contained through an agreement negotiated between the trade unions (pushed by rank and file members motivated to compromise by the specter of increasing unemployment, especially in the more politicized industrial sectors such as automobile production) and representatives of the center-left government of the time (Cherki and Wieviorka 1980:76/7).

The mid 1970s also saw an upsurge of collective action in the housing sector. Thanks to rapid urbanization without a corresponding increase in housing and social service provision, a majority of Italy’s cities faced severe housing shortages in the 1960s and 70s. Local administrations’ piecemeal public housing reforms failed to resolve the problem, and many homeless people sought an immediate solution by auto-reducing their

22 150,000 bill payers reduced their electric bills in Turin and Piedmont alone, and tens of thousands elsewhere in the country (Katsiaficas 2006:22).
rent (in the case of public housing tenants) or squatting unoccupied property. Most occupations were need-based actions carried out by homeless workers and families, but activists who conceptualized such direct appropriation of property as an act of political dissent soon followed suit to create the first occupied, self-managed social centers (CSOA) in Italy.

The very first CSOA was Leoncavallo (literally “Lion Horse”), established in 1975 when a group of activists in a run-down Milan neighborhood, including members of the radical labor group Avanguardia Operaia (Worker’s Avant-garde) and local residents who had been trying to establish an after-school center for neighborhood kids, jointly occupied an abandoned commercial building. The founders’ manifesto specifically denounced the city government’s collaboration with housing developers who had profited from construction in the neighborhood while failing to meet residents’ needs. “On the belief that only struggle can resolve our neighborhood’s problems,” wrote the activists, “the grass-roots organisms of the neighborhood have occupied and re-activated the property on Via Mancinelli” (Federazione Milanese di Democrazia Proletaria 1989).

According to its founders, the center was intended to address some of the neighborhood’s unmet social service needs, including a kindergarten, after-school center, medical-gynecological clinic, library, community gymnasium and spaces for performance, debates, and social and cultural initiatives (ibid). Following the example of Leoncavallo,

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23 One factor that encouraged this strategy may be Italy’s relatively soft laws on illegal occupation, which frame non-owner occupation as a civil conflict between owner and occupier rather than a crime, but it should also be noted that much occupation targeted public property and can be read as a demand, on the part of citizens, to receive what (in their judgment, at least) they deserve from the state. At any rate this phenomena was quite widespread: according to Georgy Katsiaficas, “one estimate placed the numbers of squatters in Italy between 1969 and 1975 at twenty thousand” (2006:22).
social centers sprouted in many other Italian cities: approximately fifty social centers had been created by the end of 1977, with an estimated 50,000-70,000 participants (Ginsborg 1990:382). While the act of occupation predates social centers, the rise of CSOA marks a different valence of the practice in which property is appropriated not simply for housing (although that was often an element), but for specifically collective social, cultural and political purposes. In this sense, CSOA closely resemble Case del Popolo, except that CSOA are illegal and opposed to the close relationships that Case del Popolo usually enjoy with mass parties and unions.

As a spatially rooted concentration of the counter-cultural and anti-systemic energies of activists, social centers assumed different shapes or foci according to the local contexts of their creation. While in Milan the first CSOA grew out of demands for social services (what we might call citizenship entitlement demands), the impetus from the first social centers in Bologna came from the counter-cultural underground, especially the live music scene. The 1960s and early 1970s saw the growth of a musical subculture built around live rock and roll in Bologna, which combined anti-conventional aesthetics of self-presentation with territorial, class and political identity. For instance, the local band “the Judas” gained popularity for the way they mixed covers of Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones and Bob Dylan into their repertoire alongside, for instance, music commemorating partisan figures killed by Fascists during the war (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011:16-19). Their concerts were experienced as territorially based rituals of belonging, as their

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24 Although Ginsborg’s description of social centers as a phenomena intrinsic to the 1970s helps to distinguish and characterize them, it also unfortunately (and inaccurately) implies that they died out with the decrease of mass protest activity after 1977.
working class, jeans and leather-wearing fans were united by their display of chromed metal washers stamped with the band’s name in opposition to the “good kids” and “leccati” of the period.25

In the spring of 1976, a group of creatively oriented youth activists brought these energies into the occupation of a residential apartment in the center of the city, just behind the main square. Dubbed Traumfabrik (DreamFactory), this space soon came to host musicians, comic book artists and videomakers in the style of Andy Warhol’s Factory (Lavagna 2007), subsequently joined by visiting foreign artists such as Keith Haring and New Wave figures such as Lydia Lunch during the late 1970s and early 80s (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011:22). Participants recall that the space’s soundtrack in the first year was mainly recordings of Radio Alice transmissions (Lavagna 2007).

Traumfabrik closed in 1983, but by the late 1970s other counter-cultural spaces had also sprouted up in Bologna’s urban landscape, both squatted and legal. As the punk movement gained momentum, a concert space called “Punkreas” opened in 1978 where angry young people gathered to share in the music’s anti-systemic message until the space was closed (for fire safety and royalty/copyright violations) in 1979 (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011: 24). Also in 1978, a group of young people established a kind of social center in an ex-customs house that had been converted into an after-school youth center by the city. The youth asked that the center be open also in the evening, and be

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25 The Judas (Story): the Italian version. Lamb of God: Blog by The Judas, posted April 14, 2011 at http://www.myspace.com/thejudastory/blog/472261951. The term leccato (literally meaning “licked”) refers to the slicked-down hairstyles sported by the mainstream or conventionally fashion-minded youth of the period, in contrast to the long, possibly unkempt hairstyles favored by the counter-cultural population as a rejection of prevailing standards of proper self-presentation. More generally, leccato is used to describe people who are very carefully groomed or affected in their manners.
available for concerts and hanging out in addition to the structured activities already offered; when the city, under the control of the PCI, responded by seeking to close the center, the youth occupied it. Local party officials, seeing their territorial influence threatened by this push for autonomy and self-governance, in turn sought to discredit the youth and their collective project by informing their parents that the center was a site of drug use and illegal activity (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011: 50-1).

This strategy of de-legitimizing social centers and their participants by linking them in public discourse to illegality and the violation of social norms can also be seen 30 years later in contemporary clashes between CSOA and the factions they come into conflict with, whether representatives of mass parties (left or right) or local authorities such as city or neighborhood council members. I have repeatedly observed accusations of criminality, extremism and incitement to public disorder in discursive campaigns against CSOA in Bologna, and these accusations appear to be the most effective rhetoric for mobilizing local opposition to CSOA and/or galvanizing electoral support for CSOA critics. In order to explain the historical persistence and rhetorical effectiveness of such accusations, I would like to briefly focus this historical account on the rise of violent political dissent and domestic terrorism in Italy, before moving on to a description of the development of civic associations in general and CSOA in particular through the 1980s and 90s.

**The “Years of Lead”: spiraling political violence and state repression**
By the second half of the 1970s, under the heavy cloud of economic recession, the two main mass parties, Communist and Catholic, had established a power-sharing agreement: the Communist party (PCI) was able to build on the political mobilizations of the period to achieve a level of electoral success in Italy’s 1976 national elections unprecedented since WWII, but it did so largely by radically revising (or, one could say, abandoning) its former political platform. In this shift, what historians term the “historical compromise,” PCI leaders renounced the demands of organized labor and instead agreed to support the austerity measures proposed by the Christian Democrats (DC) to deal with rising inflation and the oil crisis, reasoning that continued social unrest and worsening recession could only further undercut the position of organized labor (Salvati 2003: 573). This political withdrawal from the labor struggle widened the chasm that had developed between established/institutional and more radical leftist elements, further separating the more radical elements from the sphere of union and mass party politics.

On the basis of the parliamentary stability granted by this arrangement, policymakers developed new tools for governing political dissent through repression rather than political compromise (negotiation and reform) as before. In 1975, the DC-led government approved a law (known as the Legge Reale) that extended preventive custody and granted police forces the right to open fire on demonstrators in cases where they were judged to represent a threat to public order.\(^{26}\) The number of civilian deaths reported as a result of

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\(^{26}\) A very similar set of measures for increasing police powers had been proposed in 1973 under a different name, but this earlier legislative proposal had been powerfully and effectively opposed by the labor movement (Sorlini 1978:21); the passage of the Legge Reale can thus be read as an indicator of increasing PCI support for the ruling coalition (in that the Communist Party, though voting against the law, did not act
the Legge Reale vary widely, from 53 to 150 (Katsiaficas 2006:42); at any rate, the withdrawal of mass party support for militant labor struggle together with the authorization of deadly force marked a gradual institutional abandonment of the radical Left that developed, over the second half of the 1970s, into a spiral of increasingly violent protest matched by increasingly violent state repression.

The spring of 1977 marked a peak of conflict. Hundreds of university departments were occupied and violent clashes between protesters and police resulted in deaths among both protesters and police officers, each incident inciting larger and more violent reactions on both sides. When university student and Lotta Continua leader Francesco Lorusso was shot to death by police in Bologna March 11, 1977, protesters responded with a massive march that passed through the main commercial center of the city, breaking windows and damaging property, and proceeded to block the tracks of the central train station before returning to the university. Authorities tried to control movement through the city center and students (their movements coordinated thanks to Radio Alice transmissions) responded with barricades and Molotov cocktails; that night, police carried out an unprecedented wave of residential searches and arrests (Brambilla 1994:213). The next day, students from Bologna as well as other cities converged in Rome for a mass protest involving 50,000 young people, with attacks on police stations and shops in the city (Brambilla 1994:214). The municipal police chief, citing the station’s repeated incitements to public disorder, sent forces to close down Radio Alice. Activists responded by occupying another local station, Radio Lara, to serve the

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to block it as they could have) as well as a power shift in favor of the government and away from the extra-parliamentary Left.
movement, but police closed this second station as well after only two days (Radio Alice n.d.). By March 13 armored vehicles had been brought in to patrol the city center and university area in Bologna, while in Rome a blanket ban was applied to all public protest (Brambilla 1994: 249) and all local radio stations in the city were closed for twenty-four hours by order of the Prefect, to prevent their possible use by political activists (Lualdi 2005).

In addition to violent clashes between protesters and authorities, the period from the mid-1970s to the early 1980s earned the name anni di piombo (years of lead) for the high incidence of politically motivated killings and acts of terrorism. Multiple armed para-military groups that emerged in this period, representing both the far Left and the far Right. Between the Red Brigades and other left-wing groups, 15 people were killed and 56 wounded from 1976 to 1977; targets included policemen, politicians and judges as well as journalists and others perceived as servants of the state (Ginsborg 1990:384). A 1980 bombing at the Bologna train station killed 85 people and wounded over 200 – the attack was traced to neo-fascist elements, and the Bologna Public Prosecutor’s office ordered the arrest of numerous far Right activists, including the founders of Lotta Studentesca, the extra-parliamentary far Right group mentioned above; however, there was a great deal of obscurity and contestation surrounding the trials, and some have alleged that the Italian activists acted with the backing of international elements such as the CIA seeking, through a “strategy of tension,” to promote political instability in Italy (see Mastrogiacomo 1984, Willan 2001).
The “years of lead” were thus marked by an atmosphere of fear and tension alongside an increasing discreditation of political extremism. In this context, both the far Left and Right were viewed with mistrust and citizens were increasingly willing to accept legislative moves to restrict civil liberties in the name of greater security. In addition to the Legge Reale mentioned above and the formation of a special anti-terrorism unit in the carabinieri military police forces in 1979, the parliament passed a new anti-terrorism law in 1980 that outlined harsher sentences and expanded police powers for crimes connected with terrorism such as participation in armed groups, kidnapping and extortion, political conspiracy, and crimes against public safety (Luther Blisset Project 1999:40).  

Under the new law, persons suspected of “subversion against the state” could be held for up to 12 years without trial; at least 3,000 activists were incarcerated under these new terms (Katsiaficas 2006:54). Those who were tried faced charges that were sometimes unprecedented and often failed to represent clear violations of existing law (Katsiaficas 2006:55).

While the dubious constitutionality of this legislation and the restrictions it imposed on civil rights would have rendered it un-passable in other historical moments, in the “years of lead” it can be seen as both a tool of governance tailored to the political need of the ruling DC party (to appear competent and decisive in the face of anti-state terrorism), and a strategic deployment of the idea of the rule of law (under state control) as the only legitimate means to control violent political dissent. The ruling party was thus

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27 Law n. 15 of February 6, 1980, also called the Legge Cossiga after DC politician and former Internal Affairs Minister Francesco Cossiga, who went on to win a landslide election as President of the Republic (1985 to 1992).
able to re-assert an idea of the Italian state as strong and inviolable, an image supported by a rigid control of the use of public space achieved by denying authorizations for public protest and using municipal and carabinieri police forces to break up any attempted unauthorized aggregations before they could develop into mass protests (Katsiaficas 2006:53).

The rise of the third sector and retreat into the private sphere

With the ebbing of militant labor struggle (marked by the defeat of the Fiat factory occupation and strike in 1980) and the repression of public protest, the 1980s involved a social paradigm shift away from collective questions, ideologically based conflict and anti-conformism and toward consumption and a concentration on the private sphere (Gundle 2000:165-193). Of the three threads previously identified as feeding the 1970s Autonomism movement, collective labor was reduced through technological restructuring and incorporated and pacified through a shift towards a post-Fordist economic emphasis on the service sector, prosperity and a new culture of work (Ginsborg 1990: 381-383, Gundle 2000:165-193); feminist activists left the piazza to work instead in institutional and third sector spheres, through health centers and domestic abuse shelters (Plesset 2006:54); and the population of politicized students/counter-cultural youth focused instead on individual rebellion through music, clothing styles and illegal drug consumption (Membretti n.d.). None of these political threads disappeared, but they were no longer combined in struggling for overall societal change in the public sphere; the former social movements appeared to “transform themselves into lobbies and voluntary groups, countercultural communities, and neighborhood associations” (Della
Porta 2004:191). Not only were public protests no longer common, the new paradigm appeared to erase the inheritance of 1970s social movements (Gundle 1995:424). Historians have termed this shift towards individualism and away from collective action the riflusso (reflux/backwards flow) of Italian society: as Paul Ginsborg writes, the riflusso was “the great retreat into private life, the abandonment of collective action, the painful coming to terms with failure” (Ginsborg 1990:383).

As an individual balm for this collective disappointment, the eighties offered an economic upturn and new opportunities for consumption (Gundle 1995:411). Falling gas prices and reduced inflation fueled economic growth in Italy, and, thanks to the technological restructuring mentioned above, both the small/medium business sector and the industrial vanguard grew in strength and profitability, enabling the country to rise to fifth place among global industrial powers by 1987 (ibid:412-413). The celebrities of the era were entrepreneurs and business leaders such as Fiat leader Gianni Agnelli (voted Italy’s sexiest man in 1989) and media magnate Silvio Berlusconi. Rather than modeling counter-cultural trends or alternative leisure-time activities, however, these “divos” were pioneers of neoliberalism, championing the values of social respectability, money, power and success (ibid:431-432). Reading between the lines of conventional historical accounts, we can also recognize a shift in dominant gender relations associated with the rise of these “divos” as a new model of successful masculinity, one constructed in association with the rise of female sexualization and objectification that characterizes the so-called Berlusconian turn in Italian television.
Though Italy did not implement significant neoliberal-style privatization and deregulation until the nineties and later, the rise of private TV networks was instrumental in spreading and promoting this new, highly gendered paradigm centering on money and success, with its market-oriented ideological and cultural values to the masses (ibid: 435).

28 Berlusconi, who by the mid-eighties had already made inroads into the construction of his media empire, 29 recognized the commercial and social power of private TV and formed lobbying relationships with politicians across the political spectrum to ensure advantageous conditions for his commercial ventures. Thanks to these close ties, Berlusconi successfully convinced the Socialist Craxi government to intercede when judges ruled that Berlusconi’s television networks violated existing anti-monopoly law, and subsequently to construct pro-diffusion mass media legislation that better suited his interests (ibid).

In addition to the spread of private mass media and an associated shift in the cultural politics of gender, this period also involved a reshaping of the economy and the

28 State-owned production continued to comprise a significant percentage of the economy in the eighties, especially in some sectors such as metallurgy and vehicle production, where it accounted for about one third of overall business, more than 90% in the electricity, gas and water sector and over 75% in transport and communications (Zamagni 1993:356). The state did make some moves to follow the emerging privatization trend by selling off state-owned companies such as Italtel telecommunications company and the chemical production branch of state-owned petrochemical/gas company ENI, but these sales were not successful (Ibid). Besides several steel manufacturing plants, the main successful privatization move of the period was the sale of the Alfa-Romeo company to private car manufacturer Fiat in 1986.

29 By 1983 Berlusconi, who already owned channel 5 and oversaw the Fininvest media group, was also purchasing Italia 1 and Rettequattro as well (Gundle 1995:435). In addition to television, he (and his immediate family) also have significant holdings in publishing companies and the financial sector.

30 The simultaneous transmission on multiple local channels was ruled in violation of a postal code regulation that prohibited public channels (other than RAI) from monopolizing the network on a national level. The parliament, under the leadership of Bettino Craxi of the Socialist Party, intervened with a series of legislative Decrees (termed by Berlusconi himself the “decreti Berlusconi”) suspending the implementation of the sentence and allowing Berlusconi’s channels to continue broadcasting until a new law regulating the entire TV network could be developed (Law no. 223, eventually passed in 1990).
demographic composition of the labor market. Increasing social complexity in the period gave rise to multiples centers of power beyond the state, while at same time post-industrial economic development lead to the de-centralization of the working class and concomitant rise of the service sector (Ricotta 1999: 69). The urban middle class grew significantly along with white collar/technical/professional sectors, while the working class lost its numerical majority (Gundle 1995:413). Behind the television phenomena of scantily clad velline showgirls on popular variety shows, more Italian women entered the waged workforce, leading to more families with double incomes. At the same time, immigration to Italy (which in the 1970s had been a mere trickle and composed of one third from EU states) grew into a more significant phenomenon with a higher number of migrants originating in non-European states (De Marco and Pittau n.d.:1).

Although the 1980s are commonly interpreted as a period of withdrawal from collective concerns, it could also be argued that collective concerns found a new place in the rise of the civil society organizations, that “third sector” between the state and the market. As elsewhere in Europe, an increasingly differentiated Italian society gave rise to increasingly differentiated needs and welfare demands that existing state services did not meet successfully; the sphere of voluntary and non-profit associations grew to meet this unmet demand, branching out with the development of issue-based and advocacy-oriented associations focused on issues such as abortion, the environment and sex equality and on providing services such as job placement for marginalized workers (Ricotta 1999: 69-72). As had occurred in previous periods (i.e. during WWI), in the eighties the Italian state deliberately harnessed this growing sphere into serving the social
service needs of the national population through agreements between voluntary/civic associations and local government agencies (ibid:71).

As part of this retreat, youth culture in the 1980s became more apolitical and individualistic; young people were less interested in politics, and their participation in civil society, when it did occur, was more spontaneous, informal and issue-based (Gundle 2000: 170-171). This decrease in political engagement also seems to have been due to the better employment prospects and improved resources for schools and youth-oriented services (both due to the economic upturn and the decreased birth rate, which meant fewer young people to serve) that made life more comfortable for the generation of young people coming of age in the 1980s (ibid). Young people, it would seem, were more concerned with enjoying themselves than changing the world.

If we take CSOA as a window onto this period, however, a different story emerges. Rather than being replaced entirely, the impulse toward counter-cultural critique and anti-conformism can be seen as shifting its spaces and means of expression from universities and factory floors to the stages and dance floors of squatted buildings, and from mass public protest to individual self-representation through the shared aesthetic language of punk music and new wave clothing styles. While the veritable explosion of social center creations in the late 1970s did decrease with the dwindling of 1970s mass movement activities, some centers, such as Milano’s Leoncavallo, were closed by police but subsequently re-opened by activists, and other new ones were created.

I will outline the main differences between CSOA and institutionally oriented civic associations in more detail below, but it is important to note that existing outside of
(or in opposition to) any form of regulations or government oversight grants CSOA a great deal of elasticity and freedom to mutate. The character and focus of a given social center is largely determined by the (more or less defined) groups and/or collectives who operate within its walls; over time participants come and go, groups form and dissolve, and the social center changes as a result. It thus represents a highly flexible container whose form reflects the concerns and interests of the young people driven to participate actively in the center’s everyday management and the organization of events, which are in turn shaped by historical shifts. In the 1980s, Italian social centers thus reflected not only the general tendency to closure and self-referentiality (and the anti-social effects of the rise of heroin use in counter-cultural spheres), but also a youth cultural interest in punk music as well as an initial experimentation with mass communication technologies (Membretti n.d.). In Bologna for instance, the social center Isola nel Kantiere (Island in the Construction Site) was established when a group of young people looking for a place to sleep and hold concerts occupied several buildings in the middle of a long-term construction project in the city center.\footnote{The modern Italian alphabet does not use the letter “k” except for a few Greek-derived words, so the conventional spelling would be cantiere. The substitution of the letter “k” to indicate the hard “C” sound (which in Italian is conventionally spelled “c” or “ch”) is a fascinating and widespread phenomena in extra-institutional Leftist political culture that could probably support its own research project, but I have yet to find anything published on the phenomena in Italy. In relation to the use of “k” in Spanish Leftist circles see Rodríguez González 2006, who argues that its use in Spanish comes out of the punk subculture. Jacqueline Urla (1995) analyzes the use of “K” in the in the “rude,” anti-professional language of Basque free radio, where “K” represents a blurring of boundaries between languages, in that “K” exists in Basque orthography but not Castilian; its use, Urla argues, also invokes the once-stigmatized specter of illiteracy in the dominant language but in an ironic, ludic way that mocks Spanish’s dominant position and the processes of state-supported control and standardization that generate this dominance. In Italy, “k” spelling substitution is generally associated with young people, who often use it to abbreviate words conventionally spelled with “ch” when writing text messages on cell phones or internet chat platforms. There is a sort of movement against this practice, as can be seen from multiple groups on Facebook addressing the issue, including those in favor of the original spelling (a group titled “the group of those who still use the C
the youth who occupied the Isola weren't part of any political movement per se; they were simply seeking a space to manage as they liked and hold noisy live concerts (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011:67-79).

Other CSOA, however, evolved along similar lines as did the rest of the third sector mentioned above and joined more institutionalized civic organizations in responding to the differentiated demands of post-industrial society. As Italy shifted to an immigration-receiving country, some CSOA began to function as sites of aggregation and free housing for migrants; in the case of the Eritrean community in Milan, for instance, in the 1980s the Leoncavallo social center was used to hold meetings and organize fundraisers for the diasporic community’s political projects of national liberation (Metere 1983, as cited in Andall 2002: 396). In Bologna, a social center called Fabbrica (Factory) was established in 1989 in an abandoned factory. The founders were participants of a visual art collective, but the center soon gave rise to a collective, Senza Frontiere (Without Borders), composed of native Italian veterans of the 1970s Autonomia movement in solidarity with migrants. This collective set up a space within Fabbrica to house dozens of migrants and organized one of the city’s first mass protests in favor of migrant housing and against racism (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011: 87/8). When

instead of the damned K” [il gruppo di coloro che usano ancora la C al posto della maledetta K] and those passionately opposed to the use of K (ttitled “I hate people who instead of “ch” use the “k”!!! [ODIO QUELLE PERSONE CHE INVECE DI “CH” USANO LA “K” !!!]. Opponents of “k” use in Italian denounce it as an impurity or degradation of the language rampant among careless or ignorant youth ruined by technological channels of communication. In the political sphere, the “k” spelling variation can be seen starting in the 1980s and it continues to be commonly used in graffiti, flyers and place names to give a politically alternative or antagonistic valence, as can be seen in the names of multiple social centers mentioned in this chapter. I imagine that, as in Castilian, some of its oppositional meaning in Italian comes from an associations with punk aesthetics, but perhaps Urla’s notion of “K” substitutions mocking or degrading the purity of the standard (institutionalized, adult, bourgeoisie, etc) language may also be invoked in the Italian context.
Fabrikka was closed by police in December 1990, the Senza Frontiere collective grew and went on to occupy a pair of buildings that were owned by the local public housing authority but which had been empty for years. After a few months of independent management by the residents themselves, the Bologna city council stepped in to convert the residences to migrant service centers administered by municipal authorities (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011:88), thus bringing this extra-institutional example of welfare provision under state control.

From *Tangentopoli* to Fortress Europe: the growth of CSOA in the 1990s and post-2001 challenges

**Political upheaval and neoliberal moves**

In 1992 the country was rocked by widespread corruption scandals, dubbed *tangentopoli* (bribesburg), that involved leading figures of the Democratic Christian and Italian Socialist parties then in power. Public confidence in representational democracy, already fragile in Italy, parachuted to an all-time low as scandals were widely perceived as breaking the people’s trust and resulting in “the discreditation of the entire ruling political class” (Leitch 2003: 451). The national political scene was upended: all of the parties comprising the ruling coalition at the outbreak of tangentopoli (Christian Democracy, Italian Socialist Party, Italian Socialist Democratic Party, and Italian Liberal Party) dissolved in the following years and, while not implicated in the corruption trials,
the Communist party split following the fall of the Berlin wall into the centrist Partito Democratico della Sinistra (PDS) and the more hardline Partito della Rifondazione Communista (PRC) (ibid). A series of short-term and technical governments followed through the 1990s, none of them lasting more than 2 years (in contrast to the 5 years that represents the normal term between regularly scheduled elections). New political actors stepped into this breach. Silvio Berlusconi made his first move into electoral politics at this time, heading a center-right coalition government for about 8 months between 1994 and 1995, and this coalition also marked the first national appearance by the secessionist Lega Nord (Northern League) party.

Despite political instability, significant economic reforms were passed in the 1990s in the direction of deregulation and privatization. Rather than a turn to politically Right ideologies, these reforms were carried out by a series of internationally and Euro-oriented center-Left governments who sought to “[transform] the Italian economy, characterized by an abnormally large presence of the State, into a more market-oriented economy which would be better suited to a global competitive context” (Visco 2002). In addition to the push to bring Italy’s “abnormal” economy into line with other (largely neoliberal) post-industrial countries, reforms were also motivated by the dictates of the Maastricht treaty, which required that Italy reduce its inflation rates and public deficit and debt in order to join the single currency “Eurozone” in 1997.

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33 If the ruling collation can no longer demonstrate majority support for its proposals, one possibility is that the President of the country will exercise his or her right to appoint a “technical” government (in contrast to one elected through political processes) to carry out necessary functions until the term ends or early elections are called; individuals appointed to these posts must meet certain requirements in terms of professional competence, and any legislation they propose must still be supported by elected parliamentarians in order to pass into law.
Some of the most significant reforms occurred in the labor market and health care/social services. Legislation to “free” companies from the restrictions of collective bargaining agreements and tie wages to performance and external economic indicators was passed in the 1990s, as well as reforms that opened the door for companies to replace long-term, high-job-security contracts with short-term, part-time and “apprenticeship” contracts (Dell’Aringa 2002:17-18). Celebrated as a move toward “flexibility,” these new employment contracts have become “the main area of job creation in recent years. Most recently, almost 80 percent of the new jobs created have been under these types of “atypical” contracts” (Dell’Aringa 2002:18). With the passage of Legislative decree no. 502 in 1992, the Italian health care system also began a process of reform following Thatcher’s UK model, with a focus on decentralization, reduced public spending, private-public partnerships and the creation of local, self-governing health “enterprises” set up “to compete among themselves as well as with the hospitals and with private providers” (Bindi 2002:2). Through a 1990 Prime Ministerial decree and subsequent legislation, the government also began a process of “reorganizing” the vast number of public institutions providing social welfare services, converting them into private foundations under the decentralized control of Provincial administrations. In contrast with the relatively successful manufacture of hegemony in counties such as the USA and UK where the neoliberal valorization of free market rationality

34 The Pacchetto Treu (Treu Package), named after the Minister who first presented it in 1995, was refashioned and finally passed under the Prodi government in 1997.
35 The Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri of 16/2/1990, passed under the Prime Ministership of Giulio Andreotti (DC), was subsequently reconfirmed through Law n. 328 of November 8, 2000, passed under a center-Left coalition headed by Giuliano Amato (Socialist, then Democratic Party) as PM.
became a guiding line for all manner of governance processes (Harvey 2005), in Italy neoliberal reforms have been less sweeping and less reflective (or productive) of a wholesale paradigm shift in economic system or social/cultural values. In fact, moves toward deregulation, especially in labor law, have been heatedly debated in the public sphere and strongly contested by organized labor. When the second Berlusconi government (2001-2005) tried to further “relax” labor law protections in 2002 (most controversially by changing Article 18, which guarantees re-instatement in the case of wrongful firing), the three main national unions (with the support of even the right-wing UGL) called for a series of general strikes that garnered extensive participation (Marro 2002). In response, the government sat down to negotiate with the Christian Democratic and Socialist unions (the more hardline communist union, CGIL, refused to participate). These negotiations produced an agreement, called the Patto per l’Italia (Agreement for Italy) (Dell’Aringa 2002:18), but the CGIL has continued to oppose reforms and stage repeated and highly participated strikes.

**Electoral exodus and extra-parliamentary forms of engagement**

In addition to rearranging the national political landscape, the crisis of electoral politics represented by tangentopoli led to declines in both electoral participation and attachment to political parties (Parker 1996). Italians across the political spectrum followed the counter-cultural pioneers of the 1970s in looking elsewhere for the kind of

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36 The third largest union in Italy in terms of registered members, the Unione Generale del Lavoro (General Union of Work) is a post-1996 reformulation of a union that was established in 1950 in close connection with Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), the party that collected up supporters of the forcibly dis-banded National Fascist Party (Partito Nazionale Fascista) after the war – at the beginning, the presidency of the union was held by the same man who lead the MSI party.
associational life and bases of collective identity the mass parties used to offer. This move should also be read, however, in relation to the extra-national economic and cultural context, in which the unfolding of European economic, political and cultural unification, with its discursive celebration of multi-racial and multi-cultural “unity in diversity” (Shore 2000) was only a regional element of the larger spread of what Douglas Holmes terms “fast-capitalism,” “a corrosive “productive” regime that transforms the conceptual and the relational power of “society” by subverting fundamental moral claims, social distinctions, and material dispensations” (2000:5).

Italian political culture on both ends of the spectrum was shaped by oppositional responses to the locally experienced cultural, economic, political and ecological effects of globalized neoliberalism in the 1990s. On the Right, the rise of the Lega Nord party, with its (xenophobic) appeals to local ethnic identity and cultural values imagined as traditional, can be read as a defensive reaction against the cultural “flattening” and alienation of European unification-style pluralism and “fast capitalism.” It is also in this period that far Right activists created their first occupied, self-managed social centers: according to activists, PortAperta (OpenDoor), occupied in July 1998 in Rome, was intended to provide an “Alternative Popular Community” for those seeking to “live the communitarian values at the foundation of social life” and where young people could “affirm their identities in the face of already prevailing globalization” (as quoted in Di Tullio 2006:72). Additional occupations followed in the early 2000s, leading to the development of a nationally networked association of Right social centers called CasaPound after the poet Ezra Pound.
On the Left, there has been a growing interest in Eastern philosophies and alternative medicine, new-age spiritualism, or local food traditions (as valorized by the Slow Food movement, see Leitch 2003). Alongside food fairs and “holistic health centers,” social centers have since the 1990s offered a sphere for the pursuit of such alternative cultural interests as a form of politicized collective activity. Many of the Bologna-based social center participants I interviewed describe the late 1990s as a period of exciting growth and outreach for the extra-parliamentary Left and social centers in particular: societal concerns about political violence and extremism had decreased, leaving more room for public protest activities, and a series of center-left governments at the national level contributed to valorizing leftist political culture. The numbers confirm this impression, as the number of Italian COSA doubled from an estimated 100 in the mid-nineties to approximately 200 by the new millennium (Farro 2000:34, Wright 2000:119).

A main factor behind this growth has been the anti- or alter-globalization movement, the internationally networked collection of critical responses to globalized neoliberalism that emerged following the Zapatista opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in Chiapas in 1994 under the rallying call of “another world is possible.” These critical responses have ranged from Antagonistic Italian rap groups contesting the spread of market logics through concerts at squatted social centers to the Pantera student protest movement born in response to corporatization-oriented
reforms of the university system in 1989/90; an additional element was participation in dramatic mass protests such as the anti-World Trade Organization protests in Seattle in 1999 and the counter-summit phenomena (the World, European and Local Social Fora) that began in the early 2000s. Another important actor in the Italian anti-globalization movement has been the Association Ya Basta! (Enough Already!), formed in 1994 in solidarity with the Zapatista uprising but focused on enacting the Zapatista struggle in local Italian contexts. Ya Basta! and other similarly oriented collectives began offering free legal advice and Italian classes to migrants, regardless of legal status, through schools and drop-in centers in social centers. The association also gave rise to the Tute Bianche, a loose network of anti-globalization activists who don padded white coveralls and quickly gained media attention for the way they put themselves at the forefront of demonstrations, pushing the boundaries of non-violent protest and inviting physical clashes with the police.

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37 These reforms included Law no. 168 of 1989 and Law no. 341 of 1990, both passed under Democrazia Cristiana-led coalition governments including Socialist and Democratic socialist parties. Whereas before the finances, subject areas, etc of the university system had been under the control of the Ministry of Education, the reforms granted universities administrative and financial autonomy, including the ability to develop their own budgets and statues and choose degrees, courses, etc. As a result of the reforms, tuition rates and the percentage of costs borne increased significantly in the 1990s. Many critics see these reforms as the beginning of the process of university ‘corporatization’ (the transformation of the university from a social service aimed at educating citizens to a for-profit entity tailored to meeting the needs of employers) continued in the mid 2000s under the center-Right Berlusconi governments (see for example Collettivo Studenti di Giurisprudenza in Lotta 1999).

38 As I will describe in more detail in chapter 3, the development of CSOA in Bologna is closely linked to emergence of the Social Fora.

39 According to the association website, this struggle includes “the search for social and political autonomy as a constitutive expression beyond the obsolete forms of [democratic] representation, the construction of communities in struggle as spaces of resistance and laboratories of social alternative, a consciousness of defending the environment and common resources not only as [an act of] opposition to the omnivorous dynamic of the neo-liberal system but also as a challenge to an idea of progress championed as an option without alternatives” (Associazione Ya Basta Nordest 2010).

40 The white coveralls began as an ironic response to a statement made by the Mayor of Milan in 1994 (a member of the Lega Nord party) when demanding the closure of the CSOA Leoncavallo: "From now on,
As a flexible container reflecting the concerns of the moment, CSOA activity in this period was also shaped by the rise of a radical queer movement. While the Italian LGBTQ community was working to claim space in the country’s political institutions, in the later 1990s an anti-integrationist and “post-identity-based” queer movement emerged, fed by anti-commercial punk subcultures on one hand and post-structuralist gender theory on the other and globally networked (at least among Western countries) through annual gatherings such as Queerupt ion. In Bologna, this movement found a home in the occupied social center Atlantide starting in 1999, when a city-owned building was inhabited by three collectives (Antagonismogay, Clitoristrix- donne e lesbiche and NullaOsta), who bring together queer and feminist politics with anti-commercial alternative cultural production to create a space for “a bottom-up political elaboration that unites diverse subjectivities in practices, beginning from the self and sexuality, aimed at deconstructing the nexus of power that envelop desiring bodies/subjects” (Atlantide flyer 2006).

A third area of CSOA activity since the late 1990s and early 2000s has been the use of mass communication tools to contest the increasing “commodification of culture” noted in Italy in the 1990s (Leitch 2003:451) and the cultural-political shift represented by Berlusconi’s media monopolization. In 2002, Franco Berardi and Giancarlo Vitali, squatters will be nothing but ghosts wandering around in the city!” and when activists contesting the war in Kosovo swarmed the US Army base in Aviano, the padding was added to protect their bodies from the batons of the riot police in a tactic dubbed “protected direct action” (Bui 2001).

41 Queerupt ion has been held every year since 1998, each time in a different city (including London, NYC, Berlin, Sydney, Barcelona and Tel-Aviv). According to the event website, it is a chance “to come together as queers of all sexualities to explore, celebrate, enjoy, learn, communicate, network, create” and collectively construct “a radical alternative to the commercial, and a-political gay scene” (the story behind Queerupt ion 1998).
who were also central to the creation of Radio Alice in the 1970s, started a street-level micro-broadcasting analog television station in Bologna called OrfeoTV. This short-range local station soon inspired the Telestreet project, a network of such stations (each one with a range of less than a kilometer) in Italy and abroad. At its peak, Telestreet included more than 100 “broadcasters” (Andreucci 2007). These stations, often run by associations, voluntary organizations or out of CSOA, occupy a marginal space in two senses: they use broadcasting “shadow cones” (spaces where the signal doesn’t arrive) between large-scale broadcasters such as MTV, and operate (in Italy) within a legal loophole, in that such limited forms of transmission are not governed by existing law.

Though the Telestreet experiment ebbed, other forms of media activism were initiated in this period by social center participants, focusing on the diffusion of technical expertise and/or the production and circulation of documentaries about pressing social issues and often using the internet to distribute digital media content. In addition to media production and distribution, social centers have also been the center of anti-commercial/anti-regulation experiments with information technologies such as the “Hackmeetings” of digital counter-cultural activists hosted every year since 1998 at a different social center in a different Italian city. The Hackmeetings emerged as a response to a dramatic police crackdown on the pre-internet, modem-based Bulletin Board

42 In addition to Orfeo TV in Bologna, stations have included “TeleFabbrica” (tele Factory), established to aid a Fiat workers strike in 2002; “Disco Volante” (Flying Saucer), created by a collective of disabled adults in Ancona, Italy; Tele-Osservanza, a TV station broadcasting the daily mass and news of a parish in Cesena, Italy (active as of 2008); and “Okupem Les Ones!”, a street television station in Barcelona. In 2008 Orfeo TV, the first station in Bologna and instigator of the Telestreet movement, went on to form a media center in its headquarters on via Orfeo, legalized thanks to an agreement with the neighborhood government (Pellerano 2009).
Beginning in the 1980s, these bulletin boards were a kind of small-scale precursor to contemporary social networking sites that allowed people to exchange messages, read and reply to what others had written, etc. Unlike today’s commercially oriented social networking sites, however, BBS were maintained by private individuals at their own expense and without the possibility of profit; a small community of information technology enthusiasts emerged around these sites to communicate with like-minded but geographically distant others and share IT tips (Marino 2001). The Italian BBS also included a network called “Peacelink” that was created to promote virtual peace and electronic sharing between associations and voluntary organizations (Gubitosa 1999: chapter 5, “3 giugno 1994 - PeaceLink crackdown”). However, the Guardia di Finanza police forces in Torino began investigating BBS on suspicion of software pirating and in 1994 the Torino Public Prosecutor’s office ordered a mass sequestration of the personal computers and data storage devices of the individuals who administered the BBS under investigation (literally Financial Guard, the Guardia di Finanza was a division of the Italian military police forces in charge of financial crime, counterfeiting and the drug trade). Though eventually disproved, the accusations included “informatics fraud” and “the illicit storage and diffusion of access codes to informatics and/or telematic systems with the aggravating circumstance of the objective of obtaining profit” (Gubitosa 1999: section “Torino e Pesaro” in chapter 4, “11 maggio 1994 - Operazione “Hardware I”). In a statement that reveals much about the strategic deployment of the ideals of legality and state power, the Torinese section of the Guardia di Finanza announced that “thanks to the technical expertise gained in the course of previous investigations and an informative methodological activity, the men of the Regional Unit of the Excise and Revenue Police were able to infiltrate the distrustful world of these informatics super-experts” (ibid).
this trend by granting some legitimacy to far-left activism (or, at any rate, refraining from
demonizing it as in other periods), these inroads into electoral politics were focused
deliberately on the local level. Activists elected to office were tasked with supporting and
fueling the construction of local, self-managed social spaces outside of political
institutions, and thus activists chose to concentrate their efforts on local (municipal and
regional) political offices where office holders could directly influence decision-making
at the local level (Farro 2006:67).

The place of CSOA within/outside the third sector

Returning to the bird’s-eye view from which this historical account began, I
conclude with a snapshot of the contemporary situation. Generally speaking, civil sector
entities in Italy – from civic associations and social cooperatives to leisure clubs and
voluntary organizations – currently constitute an important and highly legitimized sphere,
enjoying constitutional recognition, legal protections and economic benefits. According
to a 2006 report, if we count also political party and union membership, nearly 40% of
Italians participate in some form of civil-sphere organization (Caltabiano 2006);
following the decrease in political party and union membership over the late 1980s and
1990s, the most popular have become sport/recreation, culture/education/professional
training and social welfare/international solidarity/migration issues, with proportionally
less but still significant participation in associations focusing on quality of life issues (Iref
1999:30). Social cooperatives, the contemporary successors of the mutual aid
associations and producers’ cooperatives of past centuries, represent an important part of
the economy and key element of social service provision, working to either provide
health, educational or social services (Type A) or integrate disadvantaged subjects
(primarily disabled people, not including subjects disadvantaged by race or gender) into
the labor market through training and employment programs (Type B). While other areas
of the Italian economy are suffering or stagnant, the number of social cooperatives has
increased 33.5% since 2001 and 19.5% since 2003 (ISTAT 2007b:1). The number of
non-profit social welfare foundations has likewise increased, by 57% percent since 1999,
in part due to the privatization legislative described above (ISTAT 2007a:1), while
voluntary organizations have ballooned an amazing 152% since 1995, especially in
southern Italy and among small-scale organizations and those offering services
(especially health and social services) directly to users (ISTAT 2005:1-2). This growth
can be read as a sign of both the appeal of this sector for participants, its importance in
propping up (and/or substituting for) state welfare provision and the legitimacy and value
ascribed to it in the public sphere.

A snapshot of CSOA gives a rather different picture. The peak of relative
legitimacy Italian CSOA achieved in the late 1990s proved to be short-lived as the second
Berlusconi government rose to power on a (strategically augmented and deployed) wave
of anti-immigration sentiment in 2001 and brought a militarized security discourse onto
the national agenda as the primary antidote to the country’s social problems. This was
predated and mirrored at the local level in Emilia-Romagna by policy and associated
legislation governing “urban security,” which has shaped representational frames and
public discourse about security and insecurity in the urban context and effectively cast
conventional CSOA activities such as the illegal occupation of property as an instance of “urban blight” to be combated in the name of security and public order. These securitization processes have had significant consequences not only for CSOA but also for civil sphere participation and political activism more broadly, as “incivil” forms of public behavior and “disruptive” expressions of political dissent are brought within the repressive, legalitistic sphere of security discourse and intervention.

Although the illegal and often impermanent character of CSOA makes an accurate mapping both difficult and fleeting, the situation in Bologna suggests that, although participants continue to be drawn to CSOA and new centers are continually created, both newly established and long-standing centers face the periodic threat of closure. Of the approximately 21 social centers/occupied spaces created in Bologna since 1990, 8 lasted a year or less (many only a week or a few months). Many have negotiated agreements with the city council for permission to use the buildings they occupy, or to move to new buildings of the city’s choosing, only to have the agreements rescinded or declared obsolete with the succession of a new city council. One center in Bologna, Laboratorio Occupato Crash!, has been closed down (and re-opened elsewhere by activists) six times since it was created in 2003, while others face smear campaigns by local political figures and candidates seeking to use the controversial issue of social centers – and the discourses of legality and urban degradation to which they have been linked – to pursue their own political interests.

Throughout this historical account, I have described variations in the relationship between the third sector and the Italian state: the liberal state (1861 – 1922) treated
associations and cooperative initiatives with some suspicion but not widespread or overt repression, the Fascist state (1922-1945) worked to absorb and co-opt the role and power of civil society entities while suppressing their underlying ideological principles, and the post-war constitutional democratic state actively supported and valorized cooperative forms as an integral element of the conceptualization of work itself. It is thus safe to say that CSOA emerged at a historical moment when associations and cooperative entities were enjoying overt and unilateral support from the state, both discursive and material.

However, despite this environment of valorization for voluntary civic engagement, CSOA were from their very inception distinguished from other ‘legitimate’ forms of association. While cooperatives and mutual aid associations were lauded for their capacity to peacefully integrate the working classes into the national economy and society of the nineteenth century and contemporary non-profit organizations fulfill a similar function with other marginalized populations today, CSOA are by their very nature explicitly and deliberately conflict-producing. While associations can be seen as the product of a (varied and dynamic but nonetheless relatively coherent) civil society movement, CSOA are the product of a more recent and more antagonistic branch of leftist collective activity, one which shares some of the historical and ideological bases of the cooperative movement but which deliberately and significantly distinguishes itself in a number of ways: through acephalous organization rather than formal hierarchy or organizational structure, through consensus decision making rather than voting, and through an emphatic rejection of the kind of political ties (with political parties, unions and/or the Catholic Church) that so often characterize the sphere of associational activity.
in Italy. As one Anglophone observer notes, “parties usurp space that in other advanced industrialized countries is held by bureaucracies and by local grass-roots organizations. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that they pervade all aspects of political, economic, and social life in Italy.” Though I would argue that parties are not the only actors in this process, I do suggest the insistent emphasis on autonomy that characterizes so much CSOA activity can be read as an implicit critique of this political-structural saturation of the Italian civil sphere and an effort to carve out a space of collective analysis and practice (what Casas-Cortés et al call “knowledge-practice” [2008]) that is opposed to the entire arrangement through which institutionalized political interests use civil sector entities to gain influence and support.

While many voluntary organizations and social cooperatives work to insert participants into existing societal, economic and political structures, CSOA seek to critique and dismantle these structures. While the cooperative movement has been closely linked to the economic sphere (both production and consumption), the CSOA movement seeks to detach itself from a conceptualization of the political Left based on solidarity, democracy in the economic sphere and the dignity of work and workers; instead of talking about what they do in terms of production or work, CSOA participants talk about progettualità (project-ness); furthermore, they tend to avoid or be very skeptical of any project-ness that leads to or is caught up with reddito (profitability) or autoreddito (individual income). Several groups of CSOA participants in Bologna have

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actually formed official associations in order to gain leverage in negotiations with local authorities, but this is often described as a tactical move better avoided if possible, in that activists see the official association structure as imposing a model based on hierarchy and the rule of law on their activity, thereby limiting what they are able to do while not offering much substantial protection from closure or negative public representation. The distinction between CSOA and other forms of collective civil sector activity is thus generated from both outside the centers (through legislation, treatment by authorities and police forces, statements by public officials) as well as from within the centers, in the discourse and practice of participants themselves; in fact, it could be argued that the majority of CSOA practice and discourse functions, in one way or another, to reproduce a distinction between CSOA and the political party/Church/union saturated sphere of official or legitimized civil society activity.

**A note on terminology**

The term *centro sociale* in general is perhaps best understood as community center in that it refers to a space of gathering collectively used by participants in an official or unofficial group for political, cultural, social and/or recreational activity (Membretti n.d.). In Italy social centers include the headquarters of associations...
established by political parties, such as those for workers established after WWII by the PCI, socializing “after-work” clubs created by employee organizations, and recreational/social associations for specific demographic populations such as youth or the elderly as well as the occupied, non-partisan spaces I focus on here.

The acronym I have been using, centri sociali occupati autogestiti (occupied, self-managed social centers), contains multiple elements – “social center” describes a kind of space, “occupied” refers to the origins of the space and its consequent legal status, and “self-managed” implies both the internal running of the center (by its residents/participants, in a non-hierarchical mode) as well as its autonomy from existing societal institutions and political structures. In reality, these elements do not always coincide; for instance, a social center may be self-managed but not occupied (i.e. the property is provided by or through an agreement with the neighborhood or municipality), or it may be a self-managed space (occupied or not) that participants wish to distinguish in some way from the social center movement and thus choose another, similar term, such as spazio sociale or spazio autogestito. Nonetheless, the acronym is useful for the way it captures the multiple elements that commonly characterize these spaces and distinguish them from other phenomena of collective political dissent and/or civil sector participation, and I will continue to use “CSOA” or “social center” except in cases where it is relevant to distinguish, for instance, between an occupied social center and one that

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45 For instance, a CSOA in Bologna changed its name from Lazzaretto Occupato to Lazzaretto Convenzionato Autogestito in 2005 after the city of Bologna officially conceded the building to the collectives involved.
is autonomous but not occupied, or to note spaces that seek to distinguish themselves through other terminology.

As suggested by this historical account, CSOA emerged as a phenomena of the political Left, and the term centro sociale is firmly associated with the far Left. Reflecting the fact that the term centro sociale, when not specified, is commonly taken to refer to a leftist space, the CasaPound network coined alternate terms to refer to its participating right-wing social centers: *Occupazione a scopo abbitativo* (OSA, meaning “occupation for residential purposes”), and *Occupazione non conforme* (ONC, roughly “non-conformational occupation”) (Di Tullio 2006). In addition to representing an exceptional case, Right social centers are much less numerous than leftist ones – while Italian CSOA numbered approximately 200 by last published count (Farro 2006:34), the CasaPound website (last updated in 2009) lists 7 occupied spaces in Italy (5 of which are in Rome) (CasaPound Italia 2009: “tartarughe”). The site also lists 20 local association chapters, which represent locally rooted groups of activists but do not necessarily have headquarters open to the public and thus cannot be seen as filling the same function as social centers.

Though this dissertation (and the ethnographic fieldwork it draws on) is strictly focused on Leftist CSOA, it is interesting to note that the primary activities publicized by Right social centers are actually quite similar to those of CSOA, including concerts, book presentations, debates, and sport or recreational activities. Despite their very distinct ideological bases (CasaPound centers claim a foundation in classical, pre-Mussolini populist, Republican-derived Fascism, while CSOA represent a range and mixture of
orientations including Anarcho-syndicalism, Autonomism and Left-libertarianism), they also converge on several political issues, especially related to the negative effects of globalized neoliberal capitalism on local populations and citizenship entitlements such as the right to housing and social welfare. Like many CSOA, participants in the CasaPound network publically indict the political and economic elite they see as responsible for pressing contemporary problems such as the growing gap between wages and the price of rent in cities such as Rome (Di Tullio 2006: 156-161). Though their specific practices and foci diverge, they also share a common objective of enacting social change by developing alternative ideas and social relations within the space of the center to be disseminated into the larger public sphere. With that said, participants continually reproduce a clear and vivid distinction (or, at times, an overt opposition) right and left social centers through their discourses and practices – as I will describe in Chapter 3, anti-fascism (including opposition to Right social centers) is a unifying theme and important node of activity for many CSOA participants.
CHAPTER 3

LOCALLY ROOTED SITES OF PRACTICE

Bologna, capital of the north-central Italian region of Emilia-Romagna, is a fascinating setting for social center activity for its political history, demographic present and many contradictions. A relatively small city of approximately 380,000 year-round residents, appreciative locals often describe it as “human-sized” and praise the fact that you can cross the medieval city center in only 20 minutes on a bicycle, though it takes 30 minutes on one of the numerous, well-served bus lines or 120 minutes in a car in stop-and-go traffic, wending your torturous way between narrow, fourteenth century stone arches and through the counterintuitive maze of one way and restricted access streets that is the constantly changing product of highly politicized urban planning. Bored young people and iconoclasts dreaming of cosmopolitan futures, on the other hand, bemoan what they see as the city’s provincial character, the ruling class that never seems to change, and the stolid (and stubborn) culture of middle-class gentility that dominates the city, imposing its norms of polite formality and respectable self-presentation onto the social landscape. For some people, the city refuses to change; for others, it is already changing too fast. Shaded and sheltered by vaulted covered sidewalks, most of the multitude of tiny shops that line the streets have been owned and worked by the same families for generations; it is only in the last decade or so that these signorili (genteel) structures have been joined by a scattering of national chain stores and restaurants as well.
as minimarkets, kebab and Chinese restaurants opened by enterprising migrants from 
Pakistan, Bangladesh and China. On Sundays after mass, the main streets and more 
respectable piazzas are thronged with elderly women in fur coats, whose weekday 
companions (domestic assistants from the Romania, Albania and the Philippines) are 
replaced for the occasion by carefully dressed family members, collectively enacting the 
social ritual of the public *passeggiata* (stroll); they often cross paths with yawning 
students, blinking under the bright sunlight, who have just emerged from their rooms 
and/or beds to get take away pizza or kebabs for breakfast.

Despite its size, however, the amount and vigor of social center activity in 
Bologna rivals much larger cities like Milan and Rome. The city’s residents reflect the 
‘aging face’ of Italy in general in that the age index at the end of 2010 was 235 elderly 
people to every 100 youth (Comune di Bologna 2010:2), but during the school year the 
city’s population is augmented by the approximately 83,000 students of the University of 
Bologna, who constitute a substantial population of both commercial consumers and 
visitors and participants at self-managed, occupied social centers (CSOA). Though the 
student population makes up nearly a quarter of the city’s population, the majority are 
non-resident and thus not eligible to vote in local elections; they thus represent a thorny 
issue for local politicians, a claims-making population with more social, cultural and 
symbolic legitimacy than political clout and whose demands are most often voiced in the 
piazza or mass media rather than the voting booth.46

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46 “Resident” as an administrative designation indicates voter and residential registration rather than place 
of current habitation per se; many people living temporarily in another city, such as students, choose to 
retain their residency at their former/permanent place of habitation.
Part of the “red belt” of Communist power (comprised of Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany, Umbria and a good deal of the Marche regions) that was generated by the Socialist-driven militant labor struggle at the turn of the century (Ramella 1998:97), Bologna is a stronghold of the traditional Left in Italy. This leadership is not uncontested: in the last municipal elections, streets were blanketed with the blatantly xenophobic posters of a candidate representing the Lega Nord party and, despite its outsider status, the Lega Nord list garnered an unprecedented 30% of votes (Comune di Bologna 2011b), especially among disgruntled (and often unemployed) native Italians living in formerly industrial, working-class neighborhoods that in the last decade have been heavily settled by migrants. Listening to speeches by candidates of the historically dominant Partito Democratico (Democratic Party) just before the elections in 2011, I overheard plenty of hissing and muttered criticisms from the large, diverse crowd gathered in the main square. The only declaration met with wholehearted enthusiasm was when a candidate for city council asserted that the Lega Nord didn’t belong in Bologna, and “we will send them packing!”

Even more than the Right, public challenges to the established, electoral Left come from the antagonistic, extra-parliamentary far Left (including, in no small part, social center activists). Cultural and political tensions pulse visibly beneath the city’s solidly genteel surface: a short stroll under the elegant sidewalk awnings shows the salmon and brick-colored walls of downtown covered in graffiti, from the politically territorial: zona nostra/antifa (our area/anti-fascist) to the ironic: bella la pace sociale: massacres and repression (how great is social peace: massacres and repression) and anti-
institutional Anglophone: stay on the barricades for a better education, in English, and i
partiti non rappresentano il movement (the parties don’t represent the movement), not to
mention each week’s crop of spray-painted announcements detailing the time and place
of the next public protest. Once designated a European Capital of Culture (in 2000) and
historically a destination for young Italians from all over the country seeking alternative
lifestyle options thanks to its national and international reputation as a center of counter-
cultural and avant-garde cultural production, recent municipal administrations have
instead distinguished themselves by their rigid policies to combat degrado urbano (urban
blight) through a crackdown on graffiti, noise violations and what are perceived as
indecorous uses of public space.

Among these many tensions and contradictions, CSOA take root. Whether
derelict factories or abandoned public buildings, the physical spaces occupied by social
center participants hold a specific place in the neighborhood and city; by occupying and
investing in these structures (clearing them out, fixing them up, obtaining electrical
and/or gas hookups, etc.), social center participants – and in some way, as if they were
living entities, the centers themselves – also necessarily become bound to the fabric of
local urban life and enter into the social, political and economic relations that constitute
it. At the same time, though located in urban space through the buildings they occupy,
social centers are not reducible to these buildings alone; rather, the social relationships
and collective political activity that constitute a social center may predate and/or outlive a
specific occupation, and many of the projects sited in CSOA overflow the physical space
of the center through activist and civic networks at the local, national and international levels.

At the time I began sustained participant observation in the fall of 2008, Bologna hosted at least six spaces that were widely considered social centers, in addition to a variety of similarly self-managed and/or autonomous leftist spaces, variously occupied and/or established as formal associations.\(^{47}\) Through prior exploratory research I had identified two spaces for my ethnographic research: Ex-Mercato 24 (ex-market 24, or XM24) and Teatro polivalente occupato (polyvalent occupied theater, or TPO). A few months into my research, however, I became interested in the activities of a group of students from the University of Bologna whose protests against proposed education reforms in the fall/winter of 2008 quickly coalesced into a cohesive national movement called Onda Anomala (tidal wave) or simply Onda (wave). In Bologna, these activists occupied a building right in the middle of the university neighborhood to form a social center called Bartleby Spazio Occupato (Occupied space Bartleby, or Bartleby for short).

Jumping at the opportunity to follow the formation of a new center from its inception, I began to divide my focus between XM24, TPO and this new space. The main (though not exclusive) focus of my data collection consisted of participant observation in

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\(^{47}\) The spaces widely identified as CSOA included Vag61, founded through occupation in 2003 and moved in 2004 to a rented space based on an agreement with the city; Laboratorio Crash!, first occupied in 2003 and moved multiple times following closure by police; Teatro polivalente occupato (TPO) (see description in text); Ex-Mercato 24 (XM24) (ditto); Lazzaretto Autogestito, which grew out of a residential occupations in the city center on the same street that hosted Radio Alice starting in the early 1980s before moving to a site in the periphery and currently in negotiation with authorities under threat of closure; Atlantide, occupied in 1998 and targeted for closure in 2011, case ongoing. Other spaces that are not technically CSOA but which collaborate in common initiatives and draw similar visitors, range from occupations within the University of Bologna, such as “Aula C,” a classroom managed by students at the University of Bologna to historic extra-parliamentary political groups and spaces such as Circolo Camillo Bernieri, the city’s primary anarchist center, established in the early 1970s.
specific physical sites. It soon became clear, however, that the amount of time and energy
required to participate regularly in social center activity would not permit such a
proliferation of sites: it took me months to find a role for myself, map the social
landscape and begin to understand what was going on at a single site well enough for
productive data collection, at which point I was loath to cut my ties and move to another
center. With the bewildering variety of activity characterizing even a single center, it was
clear that I would need time and focus to conduct the kind of fine-grained observation
necessary to my research aims. I therefore concentrated the majority of my participation
observation and interviews for the following 15 months at XM24, with some observation,
peripheral participation and interviewing at Bartleby and TPO. This allowed me to enter
into the daily activity of XM24 while at the same time observing commonalities and
differences among the sites, which I will now briefly introduce. To avoid any illusion of
staticity, however, I also outline some ways these sites have changed over time in relation
to multiple internal and external forces.

Teatro polivalente occupato (TPO)

TPO was established in 1995 when multiple artistic/theatrical and political groups
occupied a theater in the city center that had been built in the 1960s for the University of
Bologna’s Fine Arts Department (Accademia delle Belle Arti) but never completed or
opened to the public. The activists completed the work to make the theater useable and
used the space for practice and to hold performances. The newly formed Ya Basta group
(formed in solidarity with the Zapatista uprising, as described in Chapter 2) joined the
center and, in response to growing concerns about corporate media monopolies threatening free speech and democratic processes, the primary headquarters of Indymedia Italia was also established at the center.

In the late 1990s, the city administration opened negotiations with the groups to move the center elsewhere, and in 2000 a temporary site in an industrial/mixed-use district far to the south of the city center was proposed. The theater was cleared out by police in August of 2000, ostensibly for structural safety issues, and the occupying groups, with a large public march, relocated to the new space. In this period migration to the city was reaching unprecedented levels and Ya Basta, together with other unaffiliated participants, opened a school of Italian for migrants and, recognizing the increasing role played by legal discourses and mechanisms in racial exclusion, a free legal advice center as well.48

In the early 2000s, the global justice groups Tute Bianche and Disobbedienti, which had formed through protest campaigns outside of the social center setting, moved into TPO as well, and it became one of the most important sites for militant organizing by the national Disobbedienti network. TPO-based global justice activists engaged in several high-profile direct actions, including the invasion and partial dismantling of a migrant

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48 After having increased quite gradually over the 1990s, around the beginning of 2000 migration to the city and province of Bologna began to increase more markedly, with the migrant population in the city increasing from around 10,000 in 1997 to approximately 16,000 in 2000 and 17,800 in 2002, reaching approximately 47,000 by 2008 (86,600 in the province of Bologna) (Provincia di Bologna 2009:2). Though nearly half of this population lives within the city, since the beginning of the 2000s, more migrants have chosen to settle outside the city of Bologna (in the countryside and surrounding small cities and towns) than in the past. Of these, a slight majority are female and the main countries of origin are Romania, Morocco and Albania, followed by the Philippines, Bangladesh and Tunisia. A significant population of migrants from China and Sri Lanka live mainly in the city of Bologna (ibid:3). This population is also significantly younger than the native Italian population, with a median age of 31.2 in comparison to the median age of 47.2 for native Italian residents (ibid).
detention center in 2001. An unprecedented 47 people were tried for this action, charged with participation in an unauthorized protest, invasion and damage of a public building, including public figures such as the unofficial spokesperson of the Disobbedienti, a city councilor with the Green party, and the Bologna Secretary of the Rifondazione Comunista party (D’Onofrio and Monteventi 2011:108).

With the addition of these pre-formed and ideologically coherent groups, however, disagreements arose among participants over the methods and identity of TPO. The methods and direct action orientation of the global justice groups clashed with the more generally non-violent principles of several artistic groups and the feminist collective SexyShock that were using the center as their base. Conflicts also arose around gender dynamics within the center and participants’ divergent visions of political engagement. Specifically, participants in the feminist collective found that the center was becoming rigid and exclusive in terms of both identity and shared practices, with clear boundaries drawn between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ visions of how to imagine and enact activism; they felt this environment stifled both the self-realization of marginalized

49 First called centri di permanenza temporanea (temporary stay centers or CPT), these structures were established in 1998 under the enter-Left Prodi government as part of the Italian immigration control system, intended to detain undocumented migrants in preparation for their being expelled from the country. In 2008, the CPT were re-named centri di identificazione ed espulsione (identification and expulsion centers or CIE).

50 The feminist collective SexyShock (a play on “sexyshop,” the Italian term for sex toy shops), was established in 2001 following a popular protest in Bologna against the entrance of pro-life organizations into a public health clinic in Bologna and the move, in the same period, to reconsider abortion rights in Italy. From the beginning participants focused on the affirmation of female desire and sexuality as a starting point for self-realization and larger political engagement, and when SexyShock was located within the original Teatro Polivalente Occupato (TPO), it was a kind of shop and workshop space featuring alternative sex toys, pornography and books in a sex-positive feminist atmosphere modeled after “Sh!” the “women’s erotic emporium” in London or Babeland (formerly Toys in Babeland), the women-owned sex toy boutique in Seattle and New York City. After leaving the social center in 2004, participants formed an association and in 2006 opened an actual store front, called Betty&Books, which is both a sex toy shop and site for workshops, book presentations, film screenings and other events.
subjects (namely women and queer people) and prevented the kind of transversal, experimental projects of networking among groups and projects that they wanted to pursue. When they raised these concerns and were met with a defensive closing of the ranks on the part of global justice activists, the feminist collective chose to leave the center.

The experiences of women at TPO echo the marginalization of women in the 1960s student movements in Italy (Birnbaum 1986:80), which itself mirrors the way that women’s gender-specific concerns were suppressed within the historical mass party system in favor of ‘working class unity’ (Rothenberg 2006:285-286). In fact, dissenting feminist participants at TPO identified the basis of their frustration in the identitarian logics of group membership and practice characteristic of traditional institutional politics in Italy, which they saw as reproduced by certain other participants at TPO. These modes, they argued, left no room for networking among subjects or for experimentation by individual subjects seeking new ways of understanding themselves and their prospects for being in the world. At the time, dissenting participants saw this rigid model of group membership as a fatal flaw of the CSOA model, but it can also be seen as the reproduction of existing modes of relating, within the flexible container of the social center. As illustrated by other centers in Bologna, the flexibility of social centers can also permit the development of more flexible, open-ended political imaginaries and modes of action.

Shortly after dissenting groups split off, ongoing negotiations between TPO activists and city administrators produced an agreement to relocate the center to a disused
building owned by the national rail company, a site that was smaller but more centrally located than the building they had been occupying. As part of this process of negotiation, center participants refashioned the center’s public profile to emphasize their cultural and recreational activities (theater, concerts, etc.), facets valorized and legitimized in municipal policy documents, rather than their anti-globalization direct action. Though some of the original participants remain, others have joined the center and changed it as a result. The center continues to host Ya Basta, multiple artistic and theatrical groups, a radio station and, thanks in part to the stability granted by the written agreement with authorities, holds numerous, well-attended concerts and cultural events.

**Ex-Mercato 24 (XM24)**

XM24 can be traced to an upsurge of locally rooted global justice activism that, fueled by the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999, developed around a summit of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development in Bologna in 2000. There were a series of very well attended public meetings, bringing together a variety of small groups and collective actors under a loose umbrella group Contropiani. To host the hundreds of out-of-town activists gathered in Bologna for the anti-OECD protests and subsequent events, Contropiani participants negotiated with the city to obtain the use of an unused public building, and continued to occupy the space for the next year and a half, using it to organize the Bologna Social Forum and local participation in the 2001 anti-G8 protests in Genoa.
In 2002 the city administration announced its intentions to turn the building into a parking lot and, in an effort to oust Contropiani, offered the group the use of a former fruit and vegetable market (constructed in the 1940s and abandoned since 1994) in the historically working-class Bolognina neighborhood, the site of significant resistance activity during WWII. Several of the collectives that had comprised Contropiani, together with a university-based students collective, moved together to this new space, Ex-Mercato 24, under an ambiguous (but not unprecedented) unofficial agreement with the city. For three years the center grew (attracting participants and giving rise to new projects) and worked to establish a constructive role in the neighborhood through free film screenings, yoga, boxing and other classes at the gym, courses of Italian for migrants and a weekly farmer’s market (see below).

XM24 has hosted a station in the Telestreet network of short-range TV stations, and currently hosts the project Teleimmaginii, which aims “to enact and socialize grassroots communication, through the sharing of resources and technological knowledge” in order to promote media-making “among those people who have always been excluded from the panorama of communication and from political and social participation.” To this end, they make videos, offer periodic (free) courses in communications and have helped to initiate media production labs and documentary projects in Cuba, Venezuela and Colombia (Teleimmaginii 2008: About Us). The center also began focusing on migrant rights organizing through the group Coordinamento Migranti (Migrant Coordination), a school of Italian for migrants and, following a series of legislative moves to enroll medical professionals in the task of denouncing undocumented migrants, a drop-in center
offering free legal and medical care to migrants regardless of legal status. The center also
hosts a very active queer group called Frangette Estreme. Literally “extreme little
fringes” or “bangs,” the name playfully suggests both purposeful marginality in relation
to society and/or political movements, and extreme hair styles). The group only has about
five core members but its projects and aims enjoy wide support among XM24
participants. The group addresses a range of issues, from manifestations of sexism to
Catholic political power and cultural hegemony, all with a distinctively tongue in cheek
rhetorical and aesthetic style.

In 2005, a new center-left city administration targeted CSOA as part of its
campaign in favor of legality and questioned XM24’s use of the space, arguing that the
2002 agreement (with the previous center-right administration) had been temporary and
that the center had to make way for construction (new administrative headquarters and
high-end apartment buildings) in the area. After several years of ambiguity, however, the
administration concluded in 2008 that the precise building hosting the center would not
be demolished, and construction could take place around it. Nonetheless, participants
continue to monitor the variable winds of political will and discuss alternate plans should
the building suddenly face demolition, while simultaneously working to build the local
public support that would give them bargaining power in the case of renewed
negotiations.
Bartleby Spazio Occupato

Bartleby, Bologna’s newest self-managed space, was born when a group of student activists who had been part of the Onda student movement, protesting the corporate-style educational reforms proposed by Berlusconi-appointed Education Minister Mariastella Gelmini in 2008, occupied a beautifully renovated but long-unused university building in the middle of the city center in March of 2009. The center was quickly closed by police but repeatedly re-occupied over the course of 2009. Activists worked during periods of closure to build public support for their project and, after a second re-occupation and a tireless publicity campaign of putting up posters all around the university neighborhood, passing out flyers, holding press conferences and organizing public protests, the university administration offered the activists another building, one further away from the core of the university neighborhood but still in the city center and large enough to hold parties, concerts and other public events. The activists agreed, and still inhabit the new space as of July 2011.

Reflecting the concerns of core participants, Bartleby activity centers around knowledge production and diffusion through book presentations, a project called “know how” (in English) where students can come to carry out and discuss their research projects, and the “Bartleby common library,” where people can gift books in lieu of paying for a concert or party entrance fee. They have also targeted the rise of employment insecurity through a campaign for a guaranteed minimum wage at the regional level, under the banner “Yes, we cash!” (in English) in playful reference to Barack Obama’s campaign slogan of “Yes, we can!”
Choosing a primary site

Multiple commonalities emerge even from the brief outlines provided above: all three centers, for instance, were initiated or fed by protest activity that originated outside of the center (different elements of the anti-globalization movement in the cases of TPO and XM24, the Onda student movement in the case of Bartleby) and developed foci and offerings over time in relation to specific historical forces (e.g. increasing migration presenting needs unmet by the national government, the demolition of worker protections through labor law reform in the context of the recent economic crisis).

The centers are also observably heterogeneous. They diverge, for instance, in the main political issues they address and the ways they seek to build support for their projects, in the local groups and institutions they maintain relations with and how so, and even to some extent in the kinds of cultural events they organize, differences which reflect the centers’ distinct trajectories of development and the movements that gave rise to them as much as the differing interests and concerns of participants. Though I observed many instances of collaboration among Bologna CSOA, there are also many ongoing tensions, and participants within each center are often the first to identify and give meaning to differences among centers, as locating themselves in relation to (and distinguishing themselves from) other groups and projects is an important component of the collective processes through which participants within a center seek to define their shared aims, methods and positions.

The centers also vary in terms of their relationship to their respective local contexts. Bartleby is closely linked to the student population but does not enjoy the same
close ties with residents or business owners in the area, although activists have made efforts to widen their base of support among professors as well as workers at the local municipal theater through collaborative projects there. TPO, which has been repeatedly relocated, is connected not so much to the area (activists do not work to build ties with local residents) as to a city-wide alternative cultural production scene; for instance, a core participant who takes a leading role in organizing cultural events at TPO is also part of Siamo La Cultura (we are the culture), a city-wide network of cultural and artistic associations. XM24 participants, in contrast, have established ties with local residents and business owners, sympathetic local administrators and the Bolognina branch of the organization Associazione Nazionale Partigiani d’Italia (National Association of Italian Partisans), which holds significant symbolic authority in the area. The continual maintenance and re-negotiation of these relationships thus constitutes a significant area of activity for XM24 participants. Furthermore, having emerged out of the social forum process, XM24 is even more markedly heterogeneous than other centers, with marked divergences among participants and a wide variety of political and cultural projects.

These characteristics motivated me to choose XM24 as my primary site. I was particularly interested in observing how diverse actors build shared goals without a shared ideological foundation. I was also interested in the activity through which participants seek to negotiate a place for the center in local civic, political and cultural landscapes as a way of contesting the de-legitimization of their political practice that takes place through the local use of urban security discourses. In order to map the contours of these processes and thus make sense of CSOA participants’ activities, I also
collected and analyzed a wide range of texts circulating in public sphere, examples of discourse through which various actors (individual and collective) sought to define politics, legitimate political dissent and legitimate participation in local (neighborhood, city) and national citizenship.

**Identifying and interviewing social center participants and visitors: a note on methods**

From previous exploratory research, I identified the weekly organizational meetings as a common feature of social centers and a key component of their practices of self-management. It is through participation in these meetings that individuals are able to contribute to collective decision-making processes. For the purposes of seeking interviews I thus defined regular participants as those who attend 2 or more organizational meetings in a two month period. Given the constant cycling of center participants in and out of the centers, I approached individuals to request interviews near the beginning of the research period and again towards the end, to also include those who began to participate after the beginning of my research. Through these recorded, semi-structured interviews, I asked participants about the trajectories that brought regular participants to social centers, their past and present political activities, and what (if any) sense of belonging they associated with their participation at the social center.$^{51}$

In addition to regular participants, I was interested in the self-conception and motivations of social center visitors, people who attend one or more events organized by

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$^{51}$ For a full schedule of interview questions, please see Appendix 1.
or at the social center but without participating in any of its internal management or activities. In order to map this population of social center visitors in terms of for instance age, educational level, employment/class status and neighborhood of residence, I developed a sampling frame (a census-like set of data about the subpopulation of interest, which provides a structure to make purposive sampling more representative [Bernard 2002:144/5]) and then approached a representative sample of visitors to ask them questions about how often and why they came, and what they thought of the event. To develop the questions for this quick, relatively structured survey through collaboration with XM24 participants, for whom it represented an additional means of assessing how their public messages were being received and of documenting support for the center among neighborhood (and Bolognese) residents.

**Regular participants: multiple trajectories and modes of participation**

In contrast with institutional or parliamentary sites of civic and political engagement, CSOA participants are markedly heterogeneous in terms of both demographic profile (age, education, employment status, sexuality) as well as political identity. Though social centers are commonly associated with youth, this association reflects the historical origins of social centers in student and youth-led movements of the 1970s rather than the actual age of participants, which range from late teens to mid-60’s. Here I introduce three XM24 participants who were active at the time I

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52 For a list of questions posed to visitors, please see Appendix 2.
53 The age of participants varied the most at XM24. Given its origins in a university student protest movement, Bartleby participants were for the most part both young (18-27 y.o.) and currently enrolled at
interviewed them, to illustrate some of the motivations and circumstances that draw people to the social center, the forms their participation can take and the different meanings participants attach to their engagement.

Stella

I interviewed Stella at my Bologna apartment in the spring of 2008, one of the first interviews I conducted; I approached her because she had introduced herself in a friendly way and chatted with me about my research, and kindly agreed to help me develop my interview questions. She was 28 y.o. at the time with a university degree in Communication. She was happy to report she had just found work; a short-term apprenticeship contract photographing clothing to be sold online, which she hoped would lead to a real, permanent position in the future. She described the trajectory that led her to XM24 as beginning in high school and fueled by interactions with classmates, as her parents are not themselves politically active:

My father is a police officer [carabiniere] – he is pretty laid-back [tranquillo] but I’ve had some debates with him about this thing – he’s never forbidden me to stay inside XM, which is anti-police – I consider my father as a human being and I don’t hate him…there is some tension there. Anyway in school in Lecce [Apulia] I was super political, I was convinced that another world was possible. Down

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In order to not put individuals at risk of legal consequences as a result of my research, I use pseudonyms throughout; given the small, close-knit community of CSOA participants in Bologna, I also mask individuals’ identifying characteristics in order to ensure more substantive confidentiality for participants. This was accomplished in part through fictionalizing specific characteristics (age, place of birth, etc) according to patterns observed among participants while maintaining as much as possible the specificity of individual experiences and backgrounds.
South there aren’t social centers, but there were associations, also at school – like, there was this group called Libera-mente, it was a student association at my high school, and I was a representative. My high school was very pluralist and politically alive – lots of professors were [politically] engaged and we were always the first to occupy or do things in the city. After, at university I had a period of disillusionment – all the protests were the same, nothing ever changed…you see eight million photos of the same protest, the same faces, just different signs. I was disappointed; I didn’t read the papers anymore. In Perugia, where I went to university, there wasn’t much of this movement…sometimes I came to Bologna, I had friends here…Bologna was more active before, there were occupied places there aren’t anymore, and I always went to those social centers as a user. In [my] period of disillusionment actually I got closer to environmentalism, critical consumption and so, when I came to Bologna, I got interested in this group Robin Food.

At my inquiring expression, Stella asked if I knew “food not bombs,” using the English name.

When I replied that I had actually participated in a Portland, OR-based manifestation of the movement, Stella explained that Robin Food was another such group that scavenged unused fruit, vegetables and expired food from commercial vendors and used it to cook free meals. Several of Stella’s housemates in Bologna were part of this group, and she began participating as well:

Saturdays we recycled from the market and brought the stuff to XM to cook, we made dinners for XM and also around, like the train station piazza or SexyShock events. We used the free food to transmit a message like about critical consumption, waste. After a year with this group I changed, too – like, I didn’t pay attention to [food] expiration dates anymore – and so I grew closer to XM. It wasn’t for purely political reasons, I liked this thing of food as a universal instrument of communication. I works so well – eating together brings you together a lot.

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55 Libera-mente represents a play on words, meaning both “liberally” and “free mind.”

56 Well known in anarchist and global justice circles, “Food Not Bombs” is an international movement against militarization and poverty that recovers discarded food and uses it to cook vegetarian meals which are then given away to all comers without restriction. According to the movement’s website, the first group was established in 1980 by anti-nuclear activists in Cambridge, MA; it has since spread widely, and is currently “one of the fastest growing revolutionary movements” with local groups throughout the world (Food Not Bombs n.d.). Reflecting its origins in social justice activism, food not bombs groups are usually non-hierarchical and consensus based.
And then that year [2006] there was a photography group at XM that had set up a dark room there, but the group dissolved and the room was empty. With some friends, we thought of starting another group to not let the dark room die. At the beginning we started doing, and people brought their friends – but at the beginning we just did exhibits, nothing really with XM, the group was kind of off on its own, we didn’t really come to the Tuesday meeting, and some people had a problem with this because they said, “yeah, these people come, they use the space, but then – ” …it’s like, you take the whole package or nothing, and it’s hard to understand this dynamic at the beginning, also because where I’m from I didn’t go to a lot of social centers also because there aren’t any. But then we did this exhibit on spontaneous plant growth [in the city] and they said, “hey, you take pictures, why don’t you also – ” …that is, we had this idea to also do [a project called] Crepe Urbane [urban cracks], we wanted to do a visual research project on green in the city – I mean, not all of us, because some didn’t care, but like three of us in the [photography] group were more interested in Crepe Urbane and we did a show in 2007 and kept going with both groups, then we published that periodical where we put the photos…some of us started coming to the meetings, and we started working in the bar – to give back, you know, for using the dark room. I come to the meetings now even though Crepe Urbane is kind of, I don’t know, dormant – [other participants] have gone away on Erasmus, to Spain and Amsterdam. We’ll see what happens. 57

I wanted to ask Stella about the identity effects of her participation, but I was still figuring out how to phrase my questions. I tried out what I hoped was an effectively open-ended yet suggestive question, “what does your participation mean to you in terms of identity?” but received an unexpectedly emphatic negative and re-direction towards collective practice instead:

Identity doesn’t interest me/I don’t care about identity. I come to XM to do things. I’ve always had this thing of seeking involvement, and XM brought it out again…then you get attached to the people you do things with, I think that’s the channel, when there’s a human relationship you’re more motivated.

57 Erasmus is a European university student exchange program.
58 The Italian phrase was, “L’identità non mi interessa.” Given the use of “interested” in the reflexive to mean both “interested in the matter” and “having an opinion about the matter,” I interpret this statement as an expression of active disinterest, through which Stella distances herself from the notion and those to whom it matters.
Gesu

After the second organizational meeting I attended at XM24, before I had even introduced myself to the group, a young Italian man with a wild beard and unkempt hair approached me to ask in a nearly belligerent manner who I was and what I was doing there. I explained, and still with the same harsh tone and frowning expression, he wished me luck with my research. He posted frequently to the email list but spoke little in meetings; when he did, they were terse, often darkly ironic comments in what I soon realized was his own brand of humor. I interviewed him in June 2009 in an inner room of XM and when I asked if he wanted to choose a pseudonym, he insisted dead-pan that I call him Gesu.

Gesu was 24 y.o. and carrying out an internship as a computer programmer as part of a degree in Information Technologies. His parents, middle-class shop owners, are not political; instead, he described the path that brought him to participate at XM as beginning with involvement in musical undergrounds:

I drew near to politics through music. When people starting being able to download music from the internet I was one of the lucky few to have [an internet] connection… I could use my parents’ computer at work, with a CD burner. I went on these sites, hardcore and punk, street punk, and I downloaded. Since there weren’t any locales where I could listen to this kind of music – in Fano, in Le Marche [central Italian region] – as soon as I had a car I was always going around. Since I was spending so much on gas and I had computer skills I started writing album and concert reviews so I could have the CDs and see the concerts for free. I looked for a social center in the area – punk has always been linked to social centers – I found one in Pesaro, thirty kilometers away. Then when I went to university I lived in a neighborhood very near a social center, so on my lunch break I went there. Then I started going to the meetings – the center was part of the Disobbedienti area, there in Le Marche they are all Disobbedienti. I worked for a while and then I felt the need to move because I was getting annoyed, and I chose Bologna. The social center where I went had a pirate street TV station, I got
into the whole street TV scene and we had a national meeting near where I lived, and there I met all the Teleimmagini kids...so, since in the TV we had to transmit videos and I would have liked to transmit something with some political content, for my [obligatory] military service I came to Bologna and I met Alberto who gave me footage and a place to sleep. The next summer, with the beginning of university, I moved and the first thing I did was come to XM...I’m still here.

To explore whether his participation was based more on an affinity with the space or with the kind of activity, I asked Gesu if he participated at other Bologna CSOA.

I don’t participate at other social spaces. For me participating means coming to the meetings, the events come second...I don’t participate in other meetings, though I do happen to go to events at other social spaces because I know the people there...but I go as a user, not to do something.

Given that Gesu defined participating as involving meeting attendance, he only considered himself a participant at XM24; at other social centers, he is just another visitor or “user” who attends events but doesn’t “do anything” in the sense of pursuing specific aims through collective activity. I went on to ask, if XM didn’t exist, would you participate at another space? And Gesu answered,

Maybe, I can’t really imagine it because I find an affinity within the market much stronger than with other spaces, both politically and in terms of friendship. If it didn’t exist, I would probably participate somewhere else because I need this kind of activity.

Hoping to probe this connection he felt with a certain kind of political engagement I asked if all the initiatives he’d participated in had something in common that drew him to participate. Gesu replied:

It depends a lot on how the initiative is proposed. If the people launching the initiatives tend to make an announcement from an inclusive point of view it interests me more, if instead they do some kind of self-referential launch – like, you have to know or go find out about it – it interests me less. I’m interested in participating from the beginning in the construction of the event, not waiting for someone to tell me, “Okay, there’s this event prepared if you want to come.” If I
have to exclude something it would be this kind of situation, otherwise if I’m involved from the beginning I go and I can make time for it.

A: Are events more inclusive when the organizers describe things in a way more people can understand?

G: and participate. If the autonomous [worker’s movement people] tell me, there’s a protest in this place at this time, but to me – or they tell me two days before because they only want me to come be a number, I’m less interested. If instead they tell me two weeks before, “we’re building an initiative of this kind, we’d like you – you, [plural, as all participants of] a social space – to sign this pamphlet to launch it, we have our component and you have yours, do whatever you want,” it interests me more because I can manage a space for myself…I can also do nothing and just go to the event as a social space, but I’m more motivated because their mode is more inclusive.

I asked Gesu how he defined himself politically. He first said, “There is no label that totally represents me.” Then, without prompting, added, “Anarchist.” He rummaged around in his backpack and pulled out a book, saying that there was a passage in it, a quote by late nineteenth century German Anarchist Max Nettlau, written in 1907, that expressed what he meant by this term: 59

This Anarchist has an opinion different from mine. Which is natural, because he is different than me. I wouldn’t want him to impose his opinion on me and I wouldn’t know how to impose mine on him. It’s enough that this “other” is a free man who wouldn’t know how to use against me the thousand means that authority relies on. It is authority that one must combat, not diversity of opinion, which – among Anarchists – constitutes the true life of Anarchist ideas. Without diversity we would be a uniform herd like that of any Socialist party. Instead of deploring diversity I salute it with all my heart since only diversity can provide us the guarantee that everyone says what he really thinks and that he cannot do otherwise. I likewise I esteem every serious debate, likewise I deplore every squabble among anarchists, but even debate should be free of the aim of winning in order to permit anyone to express his ideas in an expedient and deeply developed way.

59 The book was Le Scarpe dei Suicidi (2003) an independently published volume accounting the court cases brought by the Italian state against three anarchists and their suspicious deaths in prison, rules suicide. The activists were accused of subversive acts for their alleged participation in direct actions against the construction sites of the high-velocity train lines (Treno ad Alta Velocità or TAV) being built in the ValSusa region in the mountainous north of Italy. The book is published in Turin by AUTOPRODUZIONE FENIX! or online at: http://piemonte.indymedia.org/attachments/nov2009/le_scarpe_dei_suicidi2.pdf
Avoiding the clearly weighted word “identity,” I asked Gesu if he felt like he belonged to something through or on the basis of his political activity, and he described belonging to a virtual community as a result of his hacker activity.

I’m part of virtual collectives, like Indivia, or Ortiche – a network of independent servers I participate in. (…) Seeing as I come from the virtual world, from the virtual point of view I have my community, which I’m very tied to – the community of the Hackmeeting, that was born in 1998, that is, that was the year of the first physical meeting, in Catania. We meet once a year but anyway all of it is coordinated via internet.

**Salvatore**

I interviewed Salvatore toward the end of my research period, in January 2010; I had deliberately put off this interview because I expected him, a long-term core participant, to have a lot to say and I wanted to wait until I knew enough to recognize interesting things when I heard them. We met in a loud, steamy bar run by a recently arrived Chinese family across from XM24 and frequently visited by XM24 participants as well as neighborhood residents. Salvatore, 31 y.o. at the time, worked as a graphic designer, a temporary and insecure job “like most thirty year olds,” he remarked wryly. Salvatore described participating in CSOA before arriving in Bologna.

In the nineties it [Rome] had a strong connotation in the underground and [of] cultural alternatives. I lived in Ostia Antica, a little neighborhood near Ostia, and there, there was a social center called Spaziocanino that was later closed [sgomberato], but from ninety-three to ninety-seven was one of the forges of cultural avant-garde in Rome…the first rave parties, first kind of cultural underground arriving from northern Europe…very libertarian… (…) I arrived here [Bologna] in 1997 and there were lots more self-managed situations, more spaces, not all this repression.
He came to Bologna, he explained, for the counter-cultural possibilities it offered, and became involved in student movements at the University of Bologna:

Ever since I was little I’ve always sought out cultural alternatives. I’m from the TV generation and when Berlusconi entered into politics we were really disgusted and looked for alternatives. We did political activity in school, my parents have always been leftist – my father’s been a Communist since birth, and my mother Socialist. My family has anarcho-syndicalist roots… I came to Bologna for this, too – to get away from Rome, which is an un-livable metropolis, and because at the time Bologna was a fulcrum of cultural alternatives and I wanted to insert myself there. Here the situation is different from Rome and I took two or three years to understand how it was…then we occupied at the university in both 2000 and 2001, the first occupation was a series of people who ended up at XM, we made a little self-managed room in the headquarters of DAMS…\(^\text{60}\) (…) It finished right after [the 2001 anti-G8 protests in] Genoa, it was closed down [sgomberato] that summer, then right after they closed down Ranzani – which lasted two years and was a social center sui generis because it wasn’t created by old collectives and specific political areas, it was a pre-social-forum thing, occupied for the OCSE meetings – then Ranzani began negotiating with the city to have them give it a place. During that process a university collective also entered into the negotiations and we entered the new space all together, that became XM.\(^\text{61}\)

He helped run the center’s pirate TV station (part of the Telestreet network), although he explained that it was the practices of self-management in general that most interested him:

I’ve always been very attracted by self-management in itself more than individual projects, to hold the whole thing together, so the first things I did was to stay at the bar, at the entrance, etc…then I saw that we didn’t yet have a sound system, we formed a collective called Onde Bastarde [bastard waves] that managed the concert rooms and the technical system and I became a sound engineer.

A: Did you already know how to do that?

\(^{60}\) DAMS is the acronym for the Dipartimento Arte, Musica e Spettacolo, the Department of Art, Music and Performance.

\(^{61}\) The occupation, by Contropiani and other groups, that grew out of the Bologna-based protests against the 2000 meeting of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, was located on Via Ranzani and lacking any other name is commonly called “Ranzani.”
S: I’ve promoted self-education since I was little...I already kind of knew how, but the experience helped me. There were people who explained things to me. In this way, too, this collective prefigured self-education.

I also asked Salvatore if he would participate in another CSOA or something else, if XM24 did not exist, and what drew him to participate.

S: I wouldn’t participate at another center here in Bologna; maybe I would occupy a new one. I would have participated at Ranzani.
A: The various initiatives in which you’ve participated, do they have something in common?

S: Yes, total anti-capitalism, imperfect but genuine self-management – we try and experiment – a kind of underground culture...music and imaginary.

A: Based on your political activity, do you feel like you belong to something?

S: I think if there hadn’t been certain things, I would…well, I belong to a historical flow, a line that is born in Spartaco and passes through the Paris communes…anti-capitalism, anti-authoritarianism, hating the rich…also because of the history of my family I feel very linked to political events in European history…I would define myself as Anarchist, but deep down an Anarchist doesn’t need to say it and I rarely say it…I have more contacts with the Anarchist Movement.

As even these few examples suggest, participants have diverse political backgrounds and followed different paths to their current activism. Their modes of participation likewise vary, from those who spend a large part of every day at the center (one participant joked that he had to write himself reminders in his day planner to “get out of XM for a while”), contributing to multiple ongoing projects, to those who come in only once or twice a week, after school or work, or whose participation is limited to a single political issue, collective project or set of tasks in the everyday running of the center.

One element that emerged frequently, in nearly all the interviews in one way or another, was a rejection of coercive uniformity in terms of political identity. Many participants expressed affinity with relatively well-defined political movements and/or
traditions (Anarchist, Communist, anti-fascist, Autonomist, Libertarian) or with ideologically heterogeneous traditions of collective political practice, as in Salvatore’s sentiment of feeling part of an historical “flow” that (deducing from his reference to the Anarchist-Marxist Paris commune occupations of 1871) can be understood as collectivist, anti-authoritarian practice. Even those who willingly labeled themselves were quick to explain how, rather than adherence to a specific contemporary party or political platform, these labels rather represented a shared and/or historically longstanding way of approaching political engagement. Matteo, 33 y.o. and a very active participant – the same one who joked about needing to schedule time away from XM – promptly answered my question about belonging with the words, “Libertarian Anarchist.” When I prompted in a questioning tone, “as a population? As an idea?” he replied:

As a habit. As an…attitude towards what you face every day. But this gives you on one side a habit, and on the other side also an important historical memory…that is, it gives you – all the male and female Anarchist comrades who have existed throughout history, they build a solid base on which I carry on these principles. So I feel a little… strengthened by the fact that behind me, Anarchism has given…has manifested huge things since it was born in the 1900s, when male and female Anarchist comrades began developing the movement, they have built very significant things. And this can’t help but reinforce the idea and importance of the principles that I continue to carry forward.

I nodded and said, “okay” as he said principles, and he hurried to clarify: “But not principles in the sense of ideals, these empty ideas the politicians love to throw around, principles like a habit that daily helps me make choices – no matter what you do, you make daily choices, and I make them on the basis of this, this Libertarian attitude, behavior, this Anarchist behavior.”
Matteo no doubt references the central role that theoretically informed and politically motivated practice (aka praxis) has played in Anarchist modes of political engagement historically. In the Italian context, his insistence on defining Anarchism as a practice or set of practices rather than a political platform or set of ideals also functions to distance his position and sense of belonging from the allegiance politicians seek from their supporters or parties from their members. Indeed, I came to realize that, for participants, (political) “identity” references a kind of political engagement oriented toward building support for mass parties and their agendas. From interviewees responses, it seemed to evoke the notion of identity construction pursued through grass-roots channels and diffused local sites but functioning to hierarchically organize power relations and centralize decision-making (and privileges) in the hands of the professional politicians, the political elite. Indeed, it was precisely this model that CSOA participants sought to break out of with their widely participatory, egalitarian spaces of political, cultural and civic engagement and, even in the face of contemporary moves to institutional collaboration such as the electoral activity of Disobbedienti participants, there remains a strong antipathy to what participants see as coercive, top-down or instrumental processes of collective identity construction.

This rejection of identity-based uniformity can be seen as both an ideological position and a practical strategy to facilitate the participation of a variety of individuals and groups. As Salvatore explains, the fact that XM24 originated in a mixed occupation by multiple groups and collectives represents a strength. Thanks in part to the ties built through mutual participation in the Bologna Social Forum, he explained that:
Various collectives and associations were able to collaborate and stay together in the same space. (…) This beginning, which was a little mixed, where maybe more than a political platform there was a will, and shared practices, gave XM its character…the fact of not being identitarian by referring to historical ideologies helped a lot. Identity is bad for you [ti fa male]… maybe it was the social forum experience, the fact of being horizontal in the Social Fora (…) the fact that Genoa brought together such disparate people. (…) Since we were already such mixed people, from the Anarchists to the Communists to the Social Democratic to the Satanists, we had to not put ideology before everything else…we’ve always reasoned more in terms of network than along lines.

With its origins in the Social Forum and global justice movements, XM24 is particularly representative of this tendency to reject collective political identity (and the top-down manipulation that it is seen to enable). However, I observed the same tendency, even similar terms, in the discourse of Bartleby Spazio Occupato participants. In interviews, participants stressed the different threads of activity that had come together in the center, not just the Onda student movement but also graduate students and university researchers concerned about corporate-style reforms and vanishing employment security or local artists and musicians interested in multiplying spaces of performance and cultural production at a moment when city policy seemed to be moving in the opposite direction.

At one public meeting, a Bologna resident in his late thirties, not affiliated with the university, challenged Bartleby organizers to explain what made their project different than the conventional models of political action that had come before and, in his eyes, failed to achieve anything. “It’s an occupied space, so you need programming, right? What is your platform [linea]?” he asked, his tone challenging. One of the Bartleby participants, a chemistry major named Yuri, responded:

Artists, musicians, scientists, all together – we want to see how it can work, a thing that is always in progress, always being remade …with the old Left, well,
there’s nothing we can do with these cadavers, these dead ideas from the
nineteenth century. Bartleby is not only a place to hang out or make art, it’s also a
political proposal, a new way of doing things – through shared practices and
public meetings – leaving the old stuff behind. There are no guarantees, but there
is hope. We’re the generation without guarantees or rights. A space can be a
chance to gather and build campaigns to fight for our future.

Another student, a young woman, added, “It’s a non-identity based [non identitario]
project.” I asked what she meant by this, and she replied:

It doesn’t match any of those political definitions we hear so much; it doesn’t
have this stuff of the current so-called Left. They [the city council] have
suggested that all the groups who want a space can be put together at the Caserme
Rosse. They want to put everyone in there – CGIL, the PD, whatever – but this
plan is something we can never accept, because we’re not anything like them –
[we’re] not like CGIL, a party, or a religious group. We have different needs, and
we don’t want to play that game.

What I observed being proposed and enacted by participants at XM24 and Bartleby was a
form of collective practice that neither depends on nor demands ideological homogeneity or
assimilation on the part of new participants. In lieu of a shared demographic profile,
mode of participating, ideology, political position or even defined set of concerns, what
participants can be said to share is an opposition to restrictive definitions and a tolerance
for working together across differences. They embody, in this sense, the multiple forms
of difference that characterize contemporary social movement actors and which comes
out in the forms of political practice they enact (Laclau and Mouffe 1985, Boccia 2005).

This form of collective practice can no doubt be traced in part to the development of the
global justice movement, which brought so many disparate collective actors, positions
and issues together and fueled the formation of multiple local initiatives in tune with

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62 The Caserme Rosse (literally, Red Barracks) is a large former army barracks on the outskirts of Bologna.
global concerns. Younger participants came of age amidst the 1994 Zapatista uprising, counter-summits like the 1999 anti-WTO protests in Seattle and the 2001 G8 protests in Genoa. Indeed, Stella even used the phrase “another world is possible,” the unofficial tagline of the World Social Fora, to describe her early enthusiasm for social justice struggles. Even some older participants, whose activism pre-dated the global justice movement as such, described events like the Bologna Social Forum and the Genoa protests as a breath of fresh air that represented an exciting alternative to time-worn (and worn-out) modes of imagining and enacting political engagement. In describing the lead up to the 2000 anti-OECD protests in Bologna, a 56 y.o. XM participant said:

After years of people not meeting up much in the city and individual experiences of mobilization that weren’t able to speak to the city at large (...) there was a moment of shift – you once again saw weekly meetings with two or three hundred people. There was the wave of events in Seattle (...) and people started meeting up and seeing how to redo Seattle, Bologna-style. There was a huge will to begin once more to talk together, to get discourses circulating.

As flexible containers responsive to shifts in social movement practice and political imaginaries, new social centers such as XM24 and Bartleby established on the crest of this shift in practice reflect the “tolerant identities” (Della Porta 2004) and heterogeneous mix of concerns and actors scholars have identified as characteristic of the Social Fora and related global justice movement phenomena. At the same time, they also

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63 In “Multiple Belongings, Tolerant Identities, and the Construction of “Another Politics”: Between the European Social Forum and the Local Social Fora” (2004), Donatella Della Porta presents her findings that global justice movement participants do not adhere to strict or totalizing notions of group identity; rather, they share a “tolerant” approach to diversity of identity among participants and do not perceive identitarian divergences as an obstacle to collective pursuit of common aims. Though Della Porta does not draw the connection, the heterogeneity of the global justice movement in Italy can perhaps be traced back to the process of diversification that the 1960s and 1970s student movement underwent as a result of participation by increasingly diverse actors and especially feminist collectives within the movement; as cultural historian Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum argues, the Italian women’s movement has since its inception been built around 139
incorporate activities, concerns and orientations characteristic of Italian social centers across time, such as ties to underground musical subcultures and the use of the expressive arts and independent media to diffuse their oppositional discourses.

**Generating belonging through collective practice**

As I began coming to the weekly organizational meeting in the fall of 2008 and getting a feel for how I might participate at XM24, one of the participants, an Italian man in his early 40s named Marco, inspired my curiosity. He heard me speak in the hallway outside the meeting room and, interested in my foreign accent, came to introduce himself. He told me he lived in the neighborhood near the center, but when I asked what he did at XM24, he laughed in a sort of embarrassed-sounding way and replied that he just liked to come to the meetings. He was outgoing and loquacious, usually presenting himself with beer in hand, and I saw him at every meeting I came to, rain or shine, through the wet fall into the frosty winter when the meeting room was an icebox made barely inhabitable by body heat and a wood-burning stove near the entrance. He attended the meetings as regularly as core participants who contributed to multiple ongoing projects at the center, worked in the bar or the kitchen or managing the sound system for concerts, and spoke regularly and knowledgeablely in the meetings; Marco, however, rarely spoke in the meetings and when he did, it was almost always a side comment or joke rather than a contribution to the discussion. He appeared almost like an audience member or visitor rather than an active participant. Finally, in the spring of 2009 he made a proposal, for an

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respect not only for the sexual difference of women, but also respect for differences among women and a refusal to make of such differences a basis for exclusion or division among feminists (1986).
art project making sculpture from scavenged materials, but in introducing the idea and asking for a space in the center to build the sculptures he referred to himself as an outsider: “As an outsider, I have this idea…”

The terms *interno/esterno* (inside/outside or insider/outsider) were regularly used in the meetings to distinguish between proposals by XM24 participants and those brought to the center by unaffiliated individuals or groups, such as a musical band seeking to organize a concert or a street performers collective asking to use the space for a party following a “pirate performers” protest-parade they were planning. The terms were an easy shorthand that continued to be used despite the misgivings many participants expressed in interviews about how discursively constructing a clear distinction between insiders and outsiders went against their aims of egalitarian inclusivity. It struck me, however, that Marco would describe himself as an outsider after attending meetings so regularly and clearly enjoying acquaintanceship if not friendship with many of the center’s long-term participants. I recalled him saying he just liked to come to the meetings, and realized that in fact I had never seen him around XM24 outside of meeting times. Rather than self-deprecation, it was simple fact that he didn’t participate beyond attending the meetings, and the fact that he had never really contributed to discussion might have reflected his self-perception as an outsider, that is, as someone who had nothing to contribute to discussion because he was not contributing to center management or projects.

I could commiserate with that feeling, as I was struggling to find a channel of participation for myself. With the dizzying variety of project being carried out, I was
having trouble judging where I could be most useful and/or have the best position to view center activity from the inside. I hung around the free library and archive/independent bookstore InfoShock, went to meetings of Coordinamento Migranti and the migrant rights protests they organized, and helped the queer group organize their yearly “pagan party,” but none of these seemed to offer the kind of day-to-day contact and interaction I had been hoping for. As I hung around the center to get a feel for how the space was used, I often ran into Marco. He worked in the agricultural sector, he explained, and so had most of the winter off; with his three kids in school and his female partner at work, he had time to work on his sculptures in a room he had cleared out deep in the bowels of the center. He was always friendly and asked how my research was going; as someone who appeared as unsure of his role as I sometimes felt, I felt a certain kinship with him and enjoyed our random encounters.

I eventually found a regular place for myself working in the kitchen, a steamy warm haven from the sleet and freezing wind where I got to experience the division of labor and responsibility among participants and their efforts to enact alternative political imaginaries through everyday collective activity. Besides a core group of about six participants who planned the menus, other participants would often drop in to chop or stir for a few hours. Sometimes they would ask me what needed doing. At first this struck me as absurd, since I felt so keenly my outsider-ness and lack of understanding of the inner workings of the kitchen, not to mention the center as a whole, that I thought it must be written plainly on my face. Over time, however, as I began to enter into the rhythm and relations of the space, I was able to answer them, directing them to a task that needed
doing or, more frequently, explaining the menu for the evening so they could figure out themselves what needed to be done. Caught up in my work, I went weeks without seeing Marco. One weekend, some participants were preparing for a big event (the social festival of anti-fascist cultures, which I discuss in Chapter 4) by making a huge amount of fresh *tagliatelle* pasta, a local specialty. Lacking the necessary counter space at the XM24 kitchen, they teamed up with the founders of a kind of residential self-managed social center established in a small town outside of Bologna to make the pasta together, in their much larger kitchen space. I borrowed my partner’s car and drove out into the countryside, my as-yet-unused hand-crank fresh pasta machine under my arm. There were only five or six of us, and we worked all day preparing the dough (an enormous mountain of flour with a lake of eggs in the middle to be kneaded together), rolling it out, dividing and re-dividing the lengths as they got thinner and thinner and finally cutting them into long strips and laying them over every available horizontal surface to dry. We ended by eating together, seated around a small table to discuss possible menus for the upcoming event. Unlike previous discussions where my contributions had been rare and hesitant, I offered my opinion actively and found the others asking for it in turn. It occurred to me as I sat chatting and eating, covered in flour and surrounded by the dusty golden filaments we had made together, that I was finally really participating, acting like I was sure of my place within the collective task (and, by extension, larger sphere of center activity) and being treated accordingly.

At a weekly meeting after the anti-fascist festival, a Nigerian man in his 40s came to the open door of the meeting room. The meeting was already in full swing when he
arrived, and he stood in hesitation for a few minutes observing the small, steamy room and loud discussion. Marco, who was seated at the far end, noticed the man and waved him forward. “Hi, come on in,” he encouraged, speaking for the whole group in a way I had only seen core participants do in the past. The man entered, took a seat and, at the next opening in the discussion, proposed a concert to be held at XM24. One of the participants located the center’s appointment book, lying as usual in the middle of the table for anyone to consult, and a free evening was found for the concert. Marco again spoke for the group, asking the man what technical requirements the concert would involve, so that participants who knew how to use the sound equipment could divide the sound engineering tasks amongst themselves. Far from acting like an outsider, Marco was now acting as an interface for newcomers on behalf of the group and center as a whole.

I interviewed Marco in the fall of 2009, roughly a year after we had both begun coming to weekly meetings at XM24. When I asked him about his participation at the center, he mentioned coming to meetings for a while, but identified a specific beginning for his participation, coinciding with a collective effort he was part of:

The first real thing in which I participated, we cleaned the area to the west of the center of all the syringes…it was a great thing that we did, it is rarely discussed but I think it should be talked about more – I mean the Speculazione Tossica.64

64 As part of an ongoing critical focus on drug law and policy by several participants at the center, the event consisted of a work party to clear out an area behind XM24 that had been vacant for years and attracted injection drug users who had been pushed out of other physical spaces in the city by the increase in police patrols and surveillance cameras proposed to combat incidents of “micromobility,” of which drug use (along with sales) is considered an example. Following the work party, participants dressed in biohazard suits publically delivered the biohazard containers full of syringes and other dangerous waste to the city council in a dramatic piece of political theater under a banner reading, Speculazione Tossica (toxic speculation). In an open letter to the city, organizers criticized the city administration for its lack of action in terms of harm reduction programs, citing the prevalence of “safe consumption rooms” and professional street outreach workers in other European counties and denouncing cuts in funding to such programs in Bologna as a failure of public health. The statement furthermore explained, “Let it be clear that this does
Then I participated in some decorating, setting up, and then the five days [of the social festival of anti-fascist cultures] where I took a few days off work to help. There was the space, but we had to make it ourselves, to build it, and so once the structure was set up we could connect the system, set up the kitchen and all the different parts. Mine wasn’t an ideological contribution, I contributed my labor, but it was important for me…I don’t know how to work on the computer, I can’t sit still in front of a screen, a lot of times I listen to other kids, students, younger than me, and I remain silent…but there I was able to help. I’ve made some sculptures on certain themes, the next will be for the zombie party [event being organized at XM] and I’ll do some installations within the space…I make the sculptures here, in a space I cleared out, and I use my own tools but I know that if I needed to I could ask for something from the kids [here at XM].

I was struck by the way Marco identified his own participation as beginning with a work party, a morning of working side by side with other participants to clean out and recover an abandoned urban area. He then goes on to locate his participation in other moments of collective labor, such as setting up the stages, tents, electrical system and kitchen for the anti-fascist festival. Having spent most of the five day event working in the kitchen, I didn’t see Marco much at the festival, but I did experience a similar feeling of being part of something larger than myself and of making a place for myself in the undefined collectivity of participants as a result of our shared labor. Like Marco, after working together on a collective project, even one as banal as cooking lunch for 250 people, I too felt a shift in my self-conception in relation to the group and center as a whole, from seeing myself and acting as a participant on the periphery, little more than a visitor, to
seeing myself as part of the center and thus authorized (and equipped) to act as an interface with those approaching the center from outside.

This sense of belonging generated through collective practice was also echoed in interviews. Despite many participants’ refusal of collective identity as a poisoned concept, interviewees did express and positively value a sense of togetherness, of sharing something collective. This idea emerged through descriptions of getting involved or pursuing specific projects, as in Stella’s interview, where she talks about building emotional links with people by working side by side with them. Several participants, when I asked them if they felt they belonged to something as a result of their political activity, referred to communities of practice (hackers, independent media producers) or social movements (Autonomy, Anarchism) defined by practices, habits of thought and action, a framework for making choices as Matteo described his conception of Anarchism. No one described belonging to the social center itself. It was not conceptualized as a club in which one might hold a membership, but a space of possibility, a site for organizing and defining shared areas of practice or projects to work on together. The boundaries of the space were not seen as corresponding to the boundaries of any particular collectivity; as Marco made so clear when identifying himself as an outsider even while attending (but not participating actively in) meetings, simply physically occupying the space does not automatically lead, in participants’ self-perception or the perception of others, to belonging.
Gesu explained that one of the reasons he dislikes the terms ‘inside/outside’ for describing projects – or even people – is the ambiguous, indistinct character of what they refer to:

you can’t pin down who is inside and out…an insider is someone who lives here and doesn’t do shit or has no idea what’s going on, an outsider is someone who doesn’t live inside, comes infrequently, but maybe has a perfect vision of what XM is and what he/she supports. Who is who? I don’t know and I don’t care. I don’t like it when people arrive and say, ‘hi, I’m an outsider’ – for me, the moment you come and bring something in here and the thing is interesting, you’re an insider and if during the event you act like an ass and annoy me, I will consider you an outsider…I’m evenhanded.

I asked him, so it annoys you when people come and introduces themselves as outsiders, because it seems like they don’t want to participate very much? And he replied, “yeah, it’s like they’re trying to avoid commitment or don’t care very much.” The phrase I have translated here as “avoiding commitment” was “mettere le mani avanti,” literally “put your hands up in front of you” but also implying to protect yourself from responsibility or accountability for your actions. For Gesu, coming from the outside should not absolve someone of responsibility for their actions; at the same time, however, anyone participating actively at the center, whether long-term activist or newcomer, was equally part of and accountable to the collectivity.

In addition to participants’ own senses of belonging in connection with their participation, belonging was also invoked in discussions of who was “in” or “out” of the collectivity animating the center, and why. As Gesu’s reference to someone living at the center but not contributing to it suggests, frequent debates broke out on the issue of people residing long-term in the space. Performers and traveling activists frequently slept
a night or two at XM24, but only a few participants lived permanently or for significant
lengths of time at the center. Other cases were hotly debated in the weekly meeting. In
one case, a 23 y.o. Italian woman was sleeping at the center but not actively involved in
any projects, and several participants questioned her right to stay. “Anyone who wants to
stay here,” argued Bruno, a 26 y.o. regular participant active in the InfoShock group,
“should come to at least a half hour of the [weekly] meeting, to see what’s going on, see
how they can help out, it’s the least they can do.” Sara, however, objected that the
threshold of participation should be higher: “One half hour of the meeting, no – we’re not
a church, where just saying the rosary is enough – here we need real interest and
involvement, so we can judge the will to participate...[for people staying] there should be
a limit of one week. In cases of affinity...of affinity, and participation in our projects,
okay, that’s a different matter.”

In this discussion, participation was clearly the basis on which participants
judged an individual’s right to stay. In CSOA slang, people do not belong to but rather
“cross” or “move through” (attraversare) the spaces of social centers: for instance, a
regular participant told me in an interview that “tutti quelli che attraversano lo spazio
cercano qualcosa, ma non tutti lo trovano (all the people who cross the space are looking
for something, but not all of them find it). The term attraversare suggests non-
permanence, movement, intersection and interaction; participation and the sense of
belonging that it may generate does not require or depend on permanence, either in the
sense of a part history of activism or a commitment to staying on long-term, but neither is
permanence in and of itself a guarantee of, or even a path to, belonging. Indeed, for the
few long-term residents whose status was never questioned, the right to stay and take advantage of center resources (a parking spot for a camper, an electrical connection, the bathrooms) was explicitly linked to their active participation in collective projects and activities. In terms of both participants’ self-conception and their position as conceived by others, then, belonging in the collectivity of the center can be seen as a product of participation in collective activities.

The issue of belonging has been a key topic of inquiry in anthropological scholarship on citizenship, beginning from the recognition that in many contexts, legal or formal citizenship often fails to coincide with substantive belonging, either in the sense of an individual’s cognitive, political or emotional connection to a given collectivity, or in the sense of she or he being recognized by others as part of the collectivity. At the same time, formal belonging in the shape of legal membership in the political collectivity of a state does not necessarily enable and certainly does not guarantee participation in decision-making processes, be they formal democratic processes or the various informal, extra-electoral mechanisms through which political power is distributed. The concept of “cultural citizenship,” first proposed by Renato Rosaldo (1994a and 1994b) and subsequently developed in the edited volume *Latino cultural citizenship: claiming identity, space, and rights* (Flores and Benmayor 1997), provides a suggestive re-thinking of this slippery relationship between belonging and participation in conventional models
of citizenship, in which belonging is understood as generated through participation rather than representing a necessary prerequisite for or potential obstacle to its materialization.\(^{65}\)

The concept of cultural citizenship grows out of an effort to theorize bases of belonging in a case that defies conventional or pre-existing understandings: according to the editors, the experiences of Latino communities in the US are not effectively captured by conventional theories of race based on a Black/White dichotomy, given that the category “Latino” includes a range of racial groups; furthermore, Latino identity is based not solely on race but mixes racial, cultural and linguistic bases of collective identity (1997:6). Formal citizenship status likewise fails to speak to the way individuals may occupy political subject positions as participants in local or national political communities regardless of legal status, in that even ‘undocumented’ migrants are substantively citizens in the sense of being subject to the state, making claims and taking part in civic life. As an alternative, cultural citizenship provides a conceptual tool enabling us to think about how individuals may be “recognized as legitimate political subjects claiming rights for themselves and their children” based on their economic and cultural contributions, and regardless of their official legal status (1997:11). In other words, cultural citizenship helps us think about a form of belonging constructed on the

\(^{65}\) Saskia Sassen likewise theorizes that marginalized people who lack formal political enfranchisement can still participate in “broader political processes that [escape] the boundaries of the formal polity” of national states (2002:285); she calls this phenomena “presence” and theorizes that instances of “presence” may represent new post-national forms of belonging that do not depend on legal citizenship, thus developing a concept similar to that of cultural citizenship but under a different name. In contrast, the concept of “cultural citizenship” developed by Aihwa Ong (1995, 1996, 2003) refers to the cultural dimensions of the process whereby citizenship criteria are experienced and applied to recent immigrants to the US in their process of negotiating belonging within the nation-state (Ong 1996:738). Unlike cultural citizenship as developed by Rosaldo and subsequent authors in relation to Latino communities, then, Ong’s concept is meant to draw attention to processes of exclusion and differential ranking that are generated by contemporary mechanisms of governmentality.
basis of active contribution to a given collectivity, regardless of formal membership status.

The concept of cultural citizenship could be seen as conflating the assertion of belonging with the reality of belonging in a way that obscures the role of structural power in establishing and enforcing substantive exclusions.66 Lynn Stephen (1997), who develops the concept of cultural citizenship in relation to the labor-rights struggles of documented and undocumented farm workers in rural Oregon State, clarifies that it can be most useful as an analytical and descriptive concept rather than a description of an existing status recognized by dominant legal structures; in her case, she argues, it helps to reveal how the activities of the farm workers union in Oregon have generated a form of belonging for workers in the area, leading to a new sense of “local citizenship” by creating “alternative cultural and political spaces” that affirm workers’ culture and identity (Stephen 2003:32). In other words, Stephen suggests, the utility of the cultural citizenship concept lies in its ability to help us imagine possibilities for citizenship beyond actually existing models.

Following Stephen’s suggestion, the concept of cultural citizenship can also shed light on the form of belonging constructed by social center participants. CSOA participants do not simply lack formal or legal membership status, they actively reject of any sense of belonging or collective identity based on legal status, political allegiance, or ethnic or cultural uniformity. Nonetheless, they do express and valorize a sense of belonging to something larger than themselves, a collectivity of practitioners united

66 See the review of Flores and Benmayor 1997 by Robert R. Alvarez (1998) for a brief discussion of this conceptual “slipperiness” as a weakness of the edited volume.
around shared aims and through common habits of action; their form of cultural citizenship is thus built through and on the basis of collective activity, the precise components of which they continually construct and re-fashion together. If XM24 is a laboratory of new forms of social relations and modes of political subjectivity and engagement, this form of cultural citizenship can be seen as a ‘prototype’ for how to imagine and enact a form of belonging that enables and is fueled by participation regardless of racial/ethnic, cultural or religious membership, ideological allegiance or legal status.

If participation is such an important element in generating belonging, what do participants actually do at the center? The specific form and character of participants’ everyday collective practice is the focus of chapter 4, in which I seek to answer the question, what does self-management look like?
CHAPTER 4

THIS IS WHAT SELF-MANAGEMENT LOOKS LIKE

Given my assertion that social center participants seek to enact transformative political engagement in part through their everyday practice, I would like to focus in some detail on this everyday collective practice, exploring what participants do on a daily basis, what they want to accomplish and the practices through which they seek to implement their aims. For all their diversity of aims, principles and methodologies, the particular characteristics of social center participants collective practice do suggest a shared conception of what constitutes political engagement and how it might be carried out; furthermore, as I have repeatedly suggested, this conception is largely shared among participants but markedly divergent from other, more established or institutionalized models of political engagement that have conventionally characterized collective political dissent. To explore this shared alternative conception of political engagement, I draw on the concept of “social imaginary” and its more specific conceptualization in relation to the political sphere, that of “political imaginary.”

The concept of social imaginary has been developed and utilized by the contributors to a 2002 volume of *Public Culture* introduced by Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, co-director of the Chicago-based Center for Transcultural Studies. In this issue, authors draw on the work of Greek philosopher and social critic Cornelius Castoriadis (1922-1997), who was involved in rethinking Marxism to escape its determinist
tendencies and sought instead “to identify the creative force in the making of social-historical worlds (Goankar 2002:1). For Castoriadis, a social imaginary is the “world-forming and meaning-bestowing creative force” through which new societies are created, breaking from pre-existing conditions and forms. The social imaginary is thus the material from which meaning is made and the structuring matrix that comes to guide human action – it “gives a specific orientation to every institutional system, which overdetermines the choice and the connections of symbolic networks, which is the creation of each historical period, its singular manner of living, of seeing and of conducting its own existence, its world, and its relations with this world” (Castoriadis 1987: 145, as quoted in Goankar 2002:7). Drawing on Castoriadis’ work, the authors of this issue of Public Culture build on and use the concept of social imaginary “as an enabling but not fully explicable symbolic matrix within which a people imagine and act as world-making collective agents” (Goankar 2002:1).

Charles Taylor develops the concept in his contribution, part of an ongoing effort to characterize Western modernity and distinguish it from other modernities. To this end, Taylor develops the notion of social imaginary to refer to “the ways in which people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (106).67 In this conceptualization, a social imaginary has a temporal horizon and spatial dimension, incorporating people’s sense of their place in space and time; furthermore, Taylor

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67 The “national people,” Goankar proposes, is a “paradigmatic case” of a modern social imaginary, one based on relations among strangers and incorporating a sense of “unfolding in progressive history” (5-6).
describes it as both “factual” and “normative;” that is, it combines an understanding of the normal course of things with a recognition of ideal cases and what would constitute an illegitimate or inappropriate example of action. By incorporating “a sense of the normal expectations that we have of one another,” a social imaginary makes possible the common practices that constitute social life (ibid). The social imaginary is thus shared among members of a collectivity but enacted and reproduced by individuals, shaping their sense of what is done as well as what can and should be done.

If we re-focus or restrict this concept of social imaginary in relation to the specifically political sphere, we could instead speak of a “political imaginary.” The notion of political imaginary that Fraser (1993) employs in her analysis of the emergence of a neoliberal political imaginary of social welfare is essentially a “national common sense,” a collection of “taken-for-granted assumptions about people’s needs and entitlements” that, diffused through and saturating the public sphere, “inform the ways in which social problems are named and debated” and “delimit the range of solutions that are thinkable” (9). In the case of a neoliberal political imaginary of welfare, she argues, these consist of conceptual links such as the association of welfare reception with “dependence” and “catch-phrases and stereotypical images” (9) such as the raced, classed and gendered figure of the undeserving “welfare mother” (16). By establishing these terms of debate and action, Fraser argues, the neoliberal political imaginary also shapes “the terms in which people formulate their sense of who they are, what they deserve, and what they hope for” which are “in turn bound up with assumptions about identity and difference” with important consequences for drawing lines of affinity and enmity (9-10).
Working from the object of dominant neoliberal discourse, Fraser focuses on the role and character of political imaginary as a structuring force imposed from the top down by a politico-economic elite. J.K. Gibson-Graham (2006) develop a similar concept of political imaginary as a way of conceptualizing and representing the political terrain of human action, but in the context of their quest to unearth new or potential modes of thought and action enabling social and economic transformation, they identity an emergent political imaginary that represents an affirmative and enabling way of thinking. From its origins in the Zapatista uprising to its development and diffusion through elements of the global justice movement such as the World Social Forum and Reclaim the Streets direct actions, this emergent political imaginary “is radically altering the established spatiotemporal frame of progressive politics, reconfiguring the position and role of the subject, as well as shifting the grounds for assessing the efficacy of political movements and initiatives” (xix). Specifically, the spatiotemporal frame of this political imaginary is “the here and now,” the reconfigured position of the subject is the beginning point for larger social transformation, and the new grounds of assessment involves valuing what can be done or is already being done rather than waiting for revolutionary seizure of state power or a complete overthrow of existing structures. These characteristics, I would argue, are among those that characterize the conceptual field of social center participants and shape their collective practice.

Following Gibson-Graham, I therefore argue that social center participants are engaged in building and enacting an alternative political imaginary, understood as a way of conceptualizing the world and how power works, and consequently one’s possibilities
for action within it: both what it is possible to do, and what it makes sense to do.
Specifically, the political imaginary collectively developed by social center participants enables them to envision and enact a form of political engagement that recognizes individual subjectivity as a key leverage point for the functioning of modern power and thus takes individual habits of thought and action as the beginning point or point of intervention to work for larger social transformation; rather than working or waiting for revolution and the dismantling of existing systems, they act in the here and now to enact the political, social and economic relations consistent with their alternative imaginary. In the ethnographic accounts that follow, I aim to show both the range of practices through which social center participants enact this minimally defined yet suggestive political imaginary as well as the way these practices work together to comprise the particular form of hybrid political-cultural activism characteristic of CSOA. I seek to highlight the main characteristics I see as rendering them interesting in terms of a larger understanding of citizenship and political engagement today: their pursuit of autonomy, their self-managed and horizontal organization, their rejection and replacement of market-based logics, and their combining of multiple issues and foci. In addition, I describe some of the tensions and contradictions that arise among these multiple facets of their practice.

The weekly meeting: vehicle and symbol of autogestione (self-management) through informal consensus-based decision making

When first seeking to gain access to XM24 as a site of participant observation, I asked around until I located a friend of a friend who gave me the name and number of a long-time activist at XM24, a man in his late forties named Alberto who was publically
recognized as a key participant. I was pleased with this contact, thinking that if Alberto was so involved he would likely play an important role in controlling the boundaries or uses of the space and thus help me to gain access. I met with him as he worked at the bar during the Thursday evening farmer’s market and gave him an entire presentation I had rehearsed outlining my planned research. After I had delivered my little speech, however, he only shrugged and said, “you need to bring it to the meeting [assemblea].” He was just one person, he explained, and all decisions about the center needed to “go through the meeting.”

“The meeting,” I came to understand, was both a physical gathering of people every Tuesday night and a synecdoche, where the temporally and spatially delimited assembly of participants every Tuesday night stood in for the entire process of managing the center through informal consensus-based decision making. The meeting held pride of place as both the concrete vehicle through which participants enacted egalitarian decision making as well as a sort of assurance of consensus, in that any decision passed through the meeting was assumed to have been accepted by everyone. In addition to the weekly meeting, a great deal of discussion was also carried out through the email discussion list associated with XM24.68 On many occasions the two channels of communication – the meeting and the list – were used together, but the meeting was considered the final and necessary component in the decision making process: decisions were made in the meeting

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68 The discussion list is set up so that, by sending an email or replying to the central “reflector” address, any list member can post to the entire group. Anyone can request to be added to the list, but the best way to do this is to come to the weekly meeting and approach the list coordinator in person to request being added, so it is rare that someone would be added to the list who did not also participate to some degree in the meeting itself or at least spend time at the center.
that were never discussed through the list, but almost never vice versa. After all, as one participant explained to me, not everyone is equally comfortable with or interested in using a faceless, virtual communication technology such as the discussion list; however, there can be no substitute for a face-to-face discussion and “if you don’t want to participate in the meeting, well, you won’t really want to do projects together with other people either.”

As an alternative to hierarchically organized or majority-rule decision making models, consensus-oriented decision making has been conceptualized in multiple ways – the Quakers, for instance, and Haudenosaunee have both been recognized as enacting pioneering versions – but was most explicitly canonized in Western activist circles in the 1960s and 70s through feminist, peace and social justice struggles. Though mechanisms and methods differ, it is commonly understood to be: 1) based on a common goal or commitment to cooperation, with participants actively working towards what is best for all rather than individual interests; 2) an inclusive and egalitarian process whereby as many interested parties as possible are included, and all get equal input; and 3) participatory, with mechanisms for actively soliciting the input and participation of all interested parties. To ensure these qualities, there are often clear, designated roles and mechanisms for a consensus-based meeting: a facilitator who calls for proposals to be made and discussion to begin, synthesizes what has been said, tests for agreement among participants (communicated e.g. through colored cards, a show of hands, or some verbal signal), a timekeeper who monitors the length of each participant’s contribution to ensure equal speaking time, a note taker to record discussion and decisions, and sometimes a
“vibe watcher” or emotional monitor to watch participants’ body language for non-verbal signs of withdrawal/discomfort/conflict that would indicate problems with the process (see for example Hartnett 2011). Consensus thus refers to both the process of reaching decisions collaboratively and the outcome of this process – a state of affairs in which most if not all interested parties have had their say and can support the decision, either without reservations or at least enough to willingly help implement it.69

With the rise of the anti-global movement and associated proliferation small-scale social justice campaigns since the mid-1990s, activists have re-discovered these methods, and in response to this interest, a UK-based non-profit organization called Seeds For Change (formed in 2000) has published free handbooks and manuals and offered on-site trainings and workshops for activists. Seeds For Change (SFC) methods and language are currently used by many groups internationally; I have observed them in use (or at least used as a point of reference) in many horizontally oriented and/or anarchist-oriented activist settings, both throughout the US and in international activist encounters using English as a common language, which has led to a significant degree of canonization for these methods. A relatively formal and structured interpretation of the consensus process, SFC manuals outline specific, flow-chartable steps to be following in seeking a decision, from introducing the issue, eliciting ideas and identifying emerging proposals to amending the proposal and testing for agreement.70 Those who do not agree, in SFC language, can “block” the decision, demanding further discussion, “stand aside” to

69 Predictably, there can be many inconsistencies and gaps between these ideals and the realities of actual practice among activists using consensus decision making processes, for instance when interpersonal friendship dynamics disrupt or shape the consensus decision making process (Polletta 2002).
70 Seeds For Change guides are published online at http://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/free/resources

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remove themselves so the process can move forward despite their disagreement, or express “reservations” about the proposal. Though developed precisely to facilitate more inclusive participation, these guidelines and vocabulary are also a form of specialized knowledge and thus a potential vector of knowledge-based differentiation and associated uneven participation.

In contrast, XM24 participants enacted a relatively unstructured conceptualization of consensus at their weekly organizational meeting, with no formal roles or mechanisms for verifying agreement. Proposals were raised by anyone present and discussed until people started repeating what had already been said and/or no one had anything else to add; the effective ‘test’ of consensus usually consisted in someone raising a new topic or proposal, and if no one objected to moving on than the issue was treated as decided. Lacking formal mechanisms for establishing that a decision had been made, the outcome of the consensus process was not always clear. At first I blamed my occasional confusion on my still-evolving language skills; however, I soon noted that at least once every meeting, a participant’s move to change the subject of discussion would be met with an objection: “Wait, before we move on, what did we decide about Saturday’s concert/Fabrizio’s proposal to buy two new computers for the internet point/the reappearance of rats in the kitchen?!?” Following this objection, someone would either sum

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71 The only explicit structuring element common to meetings was a loose organizational scheme whereby proposals presented by “external” people (individuals not currently participating at XM24, or those representing projects or groups from outside the center) were heard and discussed first, and proposals or issues related to the internal functioning of XM were presented afterwards. However, this was less a deliberate effort at structuring the process and more a simple courtesy allowing external people to leave after their proposals were discussed, if they chose, rather than listening to another several hours of discussion in which they had no particular part to play.
up the decision made as he or she understood it, or discussion would recommence, the
ew topic put off until the first one was resolved to everyone’s satisfaction. There were
no formal means of eliciting expressions of agreement/disagreement: no one had the job
of identifying all potentially interested parties (or “stakeholders” in the participation-
oriented language of NGOs) and approaching them to solicit their opinion. In lieu of such
mechanisms, the process thus depended on proactive, engaged participation by attendees
– if someone had an opinion or objection, it was up to him or her to speak up.

The meetings were also markedly unstructured in terms of time and participants’
use of space. Whether seated around a long table or in a crooked circle of chairs outside,
people were constantly moving around during the meetings, moving to speak aside to
each other or standing outside of/behind the circle before returning to a different seat.
The canine companions of XM participants were equally active and free in their
movements, running in and out of the room or underneath the table to play with each
other or beg for human attention. The meetings were scheduled to begin at 8 p.m. but
participants rarely began gathering before 8:30 and sometimes we didn’t begin until 9:30,
especially if one or more of the core participants was not yet present and hadn’t
communicated his or her planned absence. People often brought food and ate it during
the meeting, and beer or wine – either purchased by participants or expropriated from the
center bar – circulated freely, with cornstarch cups and large bottles passed around or set
out on the table for people to help themselves. Despite my objections that alcohol and
foreign-language fieldnote taking were an awkward mix, participants never failed to offer
it to me if I didn’t help myself. At one meeting I participated in, held outside in the warm
weather of May 2009, I sat next to an experienced environmental activist from Denmark who was sleeping at XM for a few nights as she traveled around Italy. At her request, I translated a running précis of the discussion into English for her, but after about half an hour of watching participants’ constant comings and goings, interruptions and raised voices, dogs playing loudly and the discussion repeatedly giving way to joking and general laughter, she turned with wide eyes to ask, “are they always like this?” “Like what?” I asked. “So – so chaotic! How do they ever decide anything?”

I am not suggesting, however, that XM24 participants were trying and failing to enact a formal consensus decision making process; I would argue, rather, that their practices reflect an anti-institutional and anti-structural understanding of political activism. Specifically, they drew on the deliberately non-professional, irreverent styles of historical antecedents such as Radio Alice or the Metropolitan Indians and eschewed the professional or quasi-professional idioms through which internationally known organizations such as Seeds for Change (SFC) create expert knowledge about political activism. In fact, in January 2011 one of the core participants posted an email with a link to an SFC handbook on facilitation forwarded to him by a house project in Berlin, accompanied by the comment that although it was “surely the result of an exaggeratedly rationalist conception of political activism,” some passages in the manual could be useful to “facilitate group dynamics” if re-located within “more fluid” collective practices (email to XM24 listserv January 5, 2011). 72

72 This more “fluid” model of activism can be read as an alternative not only to hierarchical or majority-rules decision making process, but also as an opposition to the influx of professionalized, institutionally derived (and institutionalize-able) models of practice that increasingly permeate political activism and civic
One of the most frequent criticisms leveled at consensus decision making is that it takes too much time, and as an activist I have participated in countless meetings in which sitting for hours, actively listening while stifling the urge to interrupt and restricting my contribution to a timed three-minute window became physically and emotionally exhausting. In such meetings, the demands of the process threatened to overshadow participants’ dedication to the product. No matter how much I cared about the issue at hand, at the phenomenological level the meetings were often a chore: the chairs seemed to get smaller and harder, people’s voices became grating and their ideas less relevant, interesting or well-expressed as the hours passed. For the first few months of my participation in XM meetings, I unthinkingly reproduced many of these structuring mechanisms by sitting still with my notebook on my lap and rarely moving or speaking off to the side with anyone. As time passed and I became more confident and synthetic in my note-taking, however, I began to participate more in the unregimented activity that cut across the through the meeting process, and it became clear that these ostensibly objectionable or disruptive behaviors – side-talking, moving around, interrupting and counter-interrupting, even joking or teasing participants in lieu of a serious response – actually helped reduce the emotional and physical weight of the consensus process to more manageable dimensions.

Despite the lack of formal mechanisms commonly associated with consensus decision making processes to ensure that everyone has their say and all interested parties engagement with the proliferation of bi-directional links between the “third sector” and state, corporate and commercial spheres. Julie Hemment (2004, 2007) analyzes these links in the case of women’s activist groups in Russia.
weigh in, I observed continual efforts to accomplish the aims of consensus – that is to say, diffuse and egalitarian participation – through informal means, manifold habitual ways of acting, interacting and communicating that on one hand prevented any one person or people from dominating the discussion and, on the other hand, removed substantive barriers to potential participation by meeting attendees. There were four or five regular participants who were particularly vocal in silencing individuals who appeared to be taking up too much space in the meeting (by speaking at too much length, for instance, or more often than others), but at various times I saw nearly all regular participants take part in correcting each other others’ behavior in the meeting. Most often corrections were subtle, as in participants speaking over top of or not responding when individuals overstepped their (subjectively judged, unwritten) allotment of time/attention or disrupted the meeting with a side conversation. Their more overt corrections – yelling out, “hey, one at a time!” or “X is still waiting to talk!” were reserved for each other, as long-term participants corrected each other much more frequently and explicitly than newcomers. I watched very carefully for patterns in turn-taking that might indicate more authority granted to certain individuals based on length of participation or social location, but I could not discern such patterns. Rather, turn-taking seemed to depend more on what people were saying and its relevance to the discussion at hand than on who they were. I thus observed a young woman who had just begun attending meetings listened to attentively after a long-term participant had just been interrupted a moment before, when the newcomer was offering a concise comment on the topic on hand and the long-term
activist was offering a roundabout, off-topic analysis of the current political moment in Bologna.

In addition to preventing each other from dominating the discussion, participants also modeled an informal, casual style of expression. This contrasted sharply with the rhetorical and linguistic formality and elegance that I observed to constitute the norm in more institutionalized academic, political and civic spheres such as the Piazza Maggiore soapbox project described above. From university seminars to the meetings of political party *circoli* or local cultural associations, I participated in multiple group discussions that were ostensibly open to anyone but were in practice characterized by a level of rhetorical and linguistic formality that effectively excluded individuals who lacked the habitus or native language skills to express themselves according to the implicit operative standards of expression. At XM24 meetings, however, participants with more formal education, whose professional habitus involved advanced rhetorical skills (e.g. a university professor, a lawyer) adapted to the informal, youth-oriented speech styles of the younger and less formally educated participants rather than vice versa. In addition to the joking mentioned above, discussion was characterized by incomplete, hesitant contributions rather than polished, analytically sophisticated monologues and abounded in slang, informal interjections such as *bho* (I don’t know/who knows/a verbal shrug), *tipo* (like) or *oi* (hey) and the use of profanity, both for emphasis and to substitute for non-specific concepts (e.g. “non ci perdiamo in queste cazzate” [let’s not get lost in this crap/bullshit]).
I would argue that this informal communicative style removed some important obstacles to potential participation on the part of individuals who might not otherwise have felt comfortable speaking publically. In addition to myself, I observed participation by high school students, individuals with little formal education, activists from Eastern Europe, Portugal and South America with a limited understanding of Italian; all of them spoke up in meetings and were listened to with the same (if not greater) attention granted to more linguistically sophisticated speakers. Similarly, the lack of formal mechanisms or roles for implementing a consensus process might also be read as a deliberate dismantling of communicative and knowledge-based barriers between long-term and new participants, effectively lowering the bar of entrance by reducing the specialized skills and knowledge newcomers must have or attain in order to fully participate. Participants thereby seek to enact an alternative, more inclusive political imaginary of participation.

**Imagining and enacting non-hierarchical self-management**

Through the weekly meeting (in combination with the discussion list), XM24 participants organized the everyday labor of running the center: from ordering supplies for the bar and managing accounts with the utility companies to cleaning and repairing the physical space and replacing equipment (such as computers for the internet point, speakers for the stages, a heater for the meeting room). Though individual groups (e.g. Frangette Estreme, InfoShock, Frigotecniche) held their own meetings, at least one participant from each individual group was expected to participate in the main weekly meeting. Participants used the meeting to identify tasks that needed doing, divide labor (who would work the bar and set up the sound system for this weekend’s concert?) and
manage the temporal and spatial logistics of multiple simultaneous uses of the space (e.g. a debate and video projection upstairs while a punk band practices downstairs). All aspects of this process reflected a largely unspoken but observable objective of sharing the work and responsibility to the greatest possible extent compatible with participants’ availability and willingness.

While several core participants did fill somewhat defined roles – the center’s non-bank “account” was held by the same person for several years, for instance – I observed continual efforts to oppose the tendency for roles and associated decision-making power to accumulate or consolidate around specific individuals, on the part of both the individuals who had acquired the responsibility and other participants. For instance, XM24 has a website, which requires constant maintenance to reflect current projects and news items but also represents a privileged instrument for representing the center in the public sphere. In the time I was there, the task of maintaining the site was shared between multiple individuals at the same time, and different individuals over time. At one meeting, when several participants made proposals about improvements for the site, it was decided that (rather than simply implementing the suggested changes) the two individuals who were maintaining it would offer a series of workshops to diffuse their technical knowledge to more participants, thus sharing both the labor and control of an important means of defining and representing the center. Participants also offered informal workshops (for each other, though open to anyone) on other technical areas necessary for center activities, such as sound engineering, digital graphic design and video editing.

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The keys to the center’s front gate and various internal rooms, another vector of both responsibility and power, were also widely distributed. Anticipating some symbolic and material significance to be associated with holding the keys, in interviews I asked participants, “do you have keys?” and, “what for?” Many of them shrugged and/or laughed at this question and my evident expectation that the keys somehow represented a politically relevant symbol as well as the material right or ability to access or control the space. Salvatore, who was part of the university collective that formed part of XM24 from the beginning, explained that people obtain their own copies of keys by asking, but “there is a reason – they are using [a given] room every day, so they need the keys. But it’s also happened that someone asks and we don’t give them to [him or her], a person who we don’t trust or who is asking for a key that’s too important – like, to the [sound equipment] cables or microphones – we decide through consensus.” I asked, “do people understand for themselves whether or not they ought to have the keys?” and Salvatore replied “yes, a little people realize it themselves, and also you only ask for them if you’re doing a specific project – you only want the ones you are using.” Carrying the keys, he reminded me, also brought with it (sometimes unwanted) responsibility: “I used to have a huge bunch [of keys], but that involved always being there to open the doors. Now I carry as few as possible.”

Participants themselves were often the first to object to dynamics through which they were ascribed a role of authority or unequal share of influence in decision-making. On one occasion at a weekly meeting Antonio, a forty-two year old man who often worked at the bar, brought up the question of a young Italian man who was staying as a
guest in one of the motor homes parked in the center’s parking lot (and plugged in to the center’s electrical supply). “I told him, it’s irritating that you sleep here and are not involved at all in the space. He annoys me because – and I’m sorry he’s not here, but I would say this to his face – because he comes, sees we are working, and doesn’t offer to help out.” Dario, a long-term participant active in the queer group Frangette Estreme who often spoke up about the interpersonal dynamics of the center, objected to the basis of this criticism. “The important thing is to be anti-sexist, anti-racist, you know – the problem isn’t that he is there scratching his balls, I like to scratch my balls too.” “Sure,” responded Alberto, “but the thing is to participate in the social life of this place, with what’s being done here, and the key is – I mean, we’re paying his bills! This doesn’t seem like a crazy thing to say, does it?” Many people voiced their agreement that the concern was valid, and someone started to change the subject, but Dario said, “wait, about that last topic – I don’t agree with this guy being, living in here. I’ve never seen any sign of anti-sexism, anti-authoritarianism in him. I don’t agree with him being here. He is someone who respects the social pyramid – kissing the asses of those above and shitting on those below, I’ve seen it – he comes and kisses my ass even though I don’t want it!”

I also experienced this de-centralization of authority firsthand through working in the communal kitchen. Before coming to the kitchen the first time, I had identified Daniela, a 34 y.o. Italian woman who worked part time with disabled adults, as the person who most often spoke for the kitchen project in the weekly meetings (saying whether or not there was an event already scheduled for a given date, eliciting volunteers...
to help cook and clean, etc.). Since I was unfamiliar with the recipes and the way work was organized, I thought it natural to ask her for guidance. I really only wanted to be assigned a straightforward, well-defined task so that I would be able to relax and observe what was going on around me, but every time I went to ask Daniela what to do next, she put me off: “Go ask Marco/Antonella/Viola, s/he’s doing the bread/salad/potatoes,” she responded, or “I don’t know, do what you think needs doing.” Constantly referring me to nearly anyone else in the kitchen or my own judgment and volition, Daniela refused the authority I would have given to her; the unspoken message was, no one/everyone is in charge here, and that includes you.

As a regular participant later explained to me in an interview, self-management is a goal to be pursued at both the individual and the collective level, as an alternative to the “cultura della delega” (culture of delegation) that characterizes dominant power relations in Italian society, in which individuals “delegate” decision-making power and critical thought to the ruling class and “sit around waiting to be told what to do.” At XM, instead, participants sought to deliberately unlearn the habits of thought and action associated with “the culture of delegation” in order to develop their own and their peers’ capacity for independent thought and initiative and the sharing of responsibility. This was not always a painless process, however. Being unwritten and deliberately innovative (that is, alternative to conventional modes), newcomers sometimes had trouble understanding and adapting to the center’s acephelous mode of organizing activity through participatory, non-hierarchical decision-making and diffused responsibility. Stella described the conflicts that sometimes developed between newcomers and long term participants:
Maybe it depends on the individual, but in general, some people have trouble inserting themselves...but I understand how it is if someone is there every single day and some guy arrives one day who doesn’t know how things work and does whatever, that doesn’t work because there are unwritten rules and I understand if one [of the long-term participants] gets pissed and says, ‘oh, that’s not how things work here’. One time we [the photography group] got in trouble, too – they wanted to change the lock on the darkroom because there was this girl who came and kept messing things up and people had to clean up after her, and then there was Dani with her dog...a guy came to tell us, ‘you guys [of the photo group] never come to the meeting, you don’t understand how things work here.’

As outlined in Chapter 3, Stella went on to describe how she began participating in the meeting and spending more time at the center, which helped her to understand the “unwritten rules” of the center and feel a part of it. “Some people never get it, they never enter into it,” she explained, “but some people do, and then they never want to leave.”

Several participants also described their experiences of entering into the activity of the center in terms of unlearning dominant cultural assumptions and ways of acting, and replacing them with new habits of thought and practice. Roberto, a 24 y.o. university student from Puglia who was active in the XM24 kitchen, described learning new ways to relate to gender and minority sexuality issues from other social center participants:

Where I grew up there weren’t really any social centers, I didn’t have any experience with places like this. I didn’t know how to act or how to talk – like with gender, and different sexualities, I had to learn how to talk about these things. A few times I used some term and they [queer participants at XM] came to tell me, ‘look, someone could find that offensive – we know you don’t mean it like that, but’ – so I came into contact with different people and ways of thinking. Learning from comrades [compagni], that’s part of the process of participating [fare parte] here.

Through modeling as well as non-confrontational (both verbal and non-verbal) corrections, participants thus simultaneously constructed and modeled the norms for an alternative – anti-sexist, non-hierarchical, non-profit-driven – model of social relations.
The everyday enactment of these alternative modes of thought and behavior was understood and intended as an exemplary model, to show both participants and the larger public what could be. As Sara noted in a discussion of better communicating the purpose of XM24 to the neighborhood of Bolognina, “I couldn’t possibly contribute to all the projects here, my job is to get more people linked up with things they are interested in. If it [a particular project] doesn’t go ahead, that’s because no one wants to do it. The long term project, instead, is to show how self-management can work collectively…everyone can contribute to that.”

**Defining the space, defining collective practice**

In addition to organizing the everyday work of running the center, participants also used the meeting to perform the equally important if more abstract collective work of defining XM24, its character and purpose. Unlike for instance an officially registered association or union chapter, the center had no official mission statement. Indeed, the closest thing to a mission statement participants produced is the description that appears on the center’s website, under the heading “What is XM24_Ex Mercato 24?” and this description is markedly open-ended:

With few means and even less money, it was laboriously possible to bring to life in these past years a reality that is social and cultural but also articulated and plural, today in the city and neighborhood, fully recognized and legitimated by the hundreds of people who weekly move through [*attraversare*] it and therefore impossible to ignore. Without false modesty and with a certain presumption, we affirm that today in Bolognina, in a neighborhood in a historical suburb of Bologna, a laboratory lives that is always open and cooking up new forms of relating, of cultural production, of alternative communication practices, of political participation, of the valorization of people’s skills and competencies. A social and urban planning gap, generator of exclusions and social and environmental wrongs, has been filled and has regained “a soul.” Today XM24 is the concrete illustration
that creative and associative forms freed from the hegemony of neoliberalism’s unified logic are possible: an example, in short, of ‘good practice’.

The center likewise has no legal or institutional existence independent of the activity of its participants: if people ceased to come to the space every day, to cook and fix bicycles and hold classes and concerts and meetings there, the center would go back to being an abandoned hulk of poured concrete and metal bereft of social, cultural or political significance. Its character and function was thus produced by the physical and discursive activities carried out there at any given moment, and consequently always in progress, always being re-conceptualized and re-produced as participants came and went or developed new interests and concerns.

The work of defining the center and the political practice that constituted it was frequently performed indirectly – through jokes, for example, or criticisms and discursive opposition serving to distinguish XM24 from other groups or projects – but occasionally also more explicitly, such as when participants debated the inclusion of meat in the communal kitchen or how to present their activities in the larger public sphere. Between explicit definitional debates and more implicit enactment of shared aims and values, I

73 Humor often played with the taken-for-granted character of shared practices or center characteristics, thereby reproducing their shared-ness and importance in defining the center and its activities. For instance, one time there were a large number of flyers that needed to be taken around to advertise for an upcoming event but participants were slow to come and pick them up, and a participant posted an ironically hyperbolic note to the email list (all in capital letters, the email equivalent of shouting), saying “If by tomorrow I don’t see [advertising] material around the city or people to give me a hand with flyering, I’m coming by XM to requisition the flyers and throw them all away.” The first response, from Gesu, quoted the line about ‘throwing them all away’ and replied, “make sure to use the paper recycling bin.” In another instance, a weekly meeting on a beautiful June evening had very low attendance and the few participants who did attend sent a note to the general list ironically invoking the style and autocratic exclusivity of an official pronouncement: “we wished to inform you all after the fact that the XM24 general meeting of today was held on Giovanni’s new terrace; obviously, restricted to invitees. If you were not invited, it is because you are not a VIP. The report outlining all decisions made will be affixed to the bar on Thursday.”
noted literally hundreds of instances in my meeting field notes, but here I will describe two specific cases which illustrate both the multiple, potentially conflicting values at play in defining shared positions as well as the dynamic and unclosed character of the definitions produced: the issue of personal profit, and the issue of how to define and enact anti-sexist practice.

**Autoreddito (personal profit)**

The issue of personal profit or income deriving from participation in center activities came up repeatedly in weekly meetings and informal conversation. For the most part, participants agreed that a system of unpaid volunteer labor, pooled profit and consensus-based decisions about redistributing resources was more consistent with their anti-market principles. When earnings from parties or the bar exceeded costs, the profit went into the central ‘account’ held by a center participant who regularly reported about the state of the coffers at weekly meetings, where the informal consensus process was used to decide how to spend the money. Paying utility bills and to re-supply the bar was taken for granted, but any other proposed spending, such as purchasing/replacing equipment, repairing the structure, or reimbursing travel expenses incurred while pursuing center projects, was subject to debate. Though participants agreed theoretically that center activities should not be profit-oriented, in reality specific cases were fuzzy and contested. Furthermore, in the recent past a participant had pocketed proceedings from several events he’d helped organize, and the scandal was still fresh in the collective memory of participants, making this issue particularly fraught.
At one weekly meeting a thirty-something Italian man, an acquaintance of several regular XM24 participants, came to suggest that XM24 (as a collective entity) salvage a silk screening press he’d heard was being thrown out by a business in the city and set it up downstairs in the center for common use, including for instance making things that could be sold on Thursday night. This immediately triggered a discussion of how such a project would be managed. Sara, a long-term participant, noted that “all these people have come to ask about silk screening since the last press died, but when we explained to them that there is all this work to do to make it work, they stop there – there is always work to self-organize [auto organizzarsi]. Who is going to hold onto the keys [to the room downstairs]? Who will clean it, and fix it when it breaks down?” The man who’d made the proposal replied that he would maintain it, since he would be using it anyway. “Okay,” responded Francesco, another of the ten or so participants who had been at XM for at least 5 years, “but we need to discuss what it will be for – only for production inside XM, or also for external uses?” The man making the proposal assured everyone that he was interested in locating the press there at XM not because it would save him money, but because it would allow him to make his professional printing expertise available to everyone.

Francesco, however, insisted that the issue involved more than knowledge diffusion: the question of personal profit/income (autoreddito) had come up before, and participants had collectively decided that the profit generated from projects hosted by the center cannot be for personal use, but only to finance the center or projects pursued through the center. With a printing press, he argued, there is already the potential to make
things for sale and so it must be considered especially carefully. Another young woman, who was not a regular XM participant but had come to the meeting to talk about the printing press, said that she would like to both make things for herself and to finance the center. Sara responded that personal profit was not an option, it had been discussed and rejected numerous times and participants were firmly opposed to the idea; many people around the table nodded and murmured their agreement. “I don’t care about making money, I just want to do my things!” objected the young woman, and another of the long-term participants, Giorgio, responded in frustration, saying, “Yeah, but who benefits? All of us bust our asses working here and personal profit never enters into it.” In the face of this firm consensus, the young woman backed down. It was finally decided that the man return to the meeting with a more developed proposal, detailing the costs involved and what he planned to do with the merchandise produced. In the following year of meetings I attended, however, he never returned with a proposal.

As part of their efforts to imagine a mode of organizing labor and resources that ran counter to the logics of the free market, participants eschewed terms such as “work” or “production” in favor of the term progettualità (project-ness) to describe their activities. The term project-ness also functioned to distinguish social center activity from other types of activity: something with project-ness possessed political valences rather than being ‘purely’ artistic, aesthetic or recreational; a project harnessed collective labor for collective ends, ends defined through open, participatory debate and thus assumed (or hoped) to represent a shared objective or common good rather than individual interests or revenue. The term project-ness was often used in discussions about resource distribution
to stand in for the whole of these multiple qualities that distinguished ‘legitimate’ or commonly acceptable center activity, activity which, in other words, corresponded to participants’ alternative political imaginary. For instance, Salvatore made a trip to Rome to meet with some activists at one of the city’s largest and most active CSOA and bring them advertising materials for an upcoming event at XM24; he did not propose the trip to the meeting ahead of time, but came after the fact to report on its outcomes and ask that his gas be reimbursed. Meeting participants jokingly interrogated him about his spending in a characteristically ironic and indirect reference to the fraught character of the issue, but after he had good-naturedly answered all their exaggeratedly specific questions, everyone agreed the trip was part of a project and thus should be financed from the center account. As one participant joked, “Non sono sicura che possiamo finanziare la tua vacanza, ma finché si tratta di progettualità... (I’m not sure we can finance your vacation, but as long as it’s an instance of project-ness...)

Anti-sexist practice

Though anti-sexism was expressed (through interviews, everyday discourse and meeting discussions) as a shared value by center participations, there was continual discussion and some disagreement about how it was to be conceptualized and concretely pursued. For instance, participants wanted to create more inclusive, non-hierarchical conditions within the center and so agreed that it was necessary to intervene with casual visitors whose behavior was seen as threatening these conditions, but there was debate about how this should be accomplished. One night, after a concert, a young Italian man in his late twenties and occasional participant at XM24 saw a male visitor restraining and
trying to kiss a female visitor who was clearly neither sober nor consenting. He ran up and grabbed the man to stop him, but the man responded violently and the situation quickly escalated, eventually requiring multiple participants to forcibly escort the man out of the center. At the next meeting, this incident was discussed. The man who had intervened described what had happened and asked the group to critique his actions. “I really want your advice,” he said. Sara answered him:

What you need to do next time is call over several women – don’t go yourself, also because going after him as a guy protecting a girl is just more of the same macho bullshit. The best thing is to have multiple women, then the guy can see what women are capable of. It’s important that they [people being kicked out] know why – that everyone understands why they are being kicked out – because maybe sometimes people see that we are kicking someone out, but if they don’t why, it’s not effective. They need to understand it’s not acceptable here, but if you are drunk, too, or just angry, then you can’t communicate effectively - if you’re not up to it, or there are not several women available, at least bring some friends, or people working at the bar, or call out, to show everyone what’s going on, like ‘hey, look at this’ – shout – draw attention, make it a scene.

The man objected that there hadn’t been time: “He was about to kiss her, at that moment, I reacted instinctively, you know – it’s like instinct, I didn’t think to get others, I just went over there.” “‘Instinct’ is just not thinking socially, thinking critically,” countered Paola, a thirty-seven year old queer woman and regular XM24 participant, making air quotes as she said “instinct.” “You have to think about what you’re doing. If someone is not about to get hurt, it’s more important to do it right.”

As Sara’s comment suggests, there was an informal but ever-present group of women ready to intervene when a visitor’s behavior became unacceptable, as in harassing, threatening or violent toward other visitors. More broadly, unwanted behaviors or orientations ranged from the reproduction of market-based values, for instance the
prioritization of profit over other considerations or the accumulation of personal property through the exploitation of others’ labors, to behaviors seen as sexist, such as the gendered division of labor, discursive authority and expertise, or aggressive/non-consensual expressions of sexual interest. More subtly, participants also modeled (but did not enforce on others) a kind of sexual neutrality or withdrawal of heterosexual dominance within the space, in that heterosexual participants did not publicly flirt or engage in sexualized joking, and heterosexual couples refrained from public displays of affection. Participants were frequently physically affectionate with one another, but in (what appeared to be deliberately) platonic ways or between participants of the same sex. Likewise, the sexualized joking I observed was exclusively non-heterosexual (such as gay male participants playfully kissing or touching heterosexual male participants). When regular participants displayed unwanted behavior, they were often corrected through joking or non-verbal cues such as being ignored; when newcomers stepped over the line, they were taken aside by longstanding participants (I never observed this but it was reported in several interviews). When visitors displayed unwanted behavior, the group of two to five women would approach the individual, explain how and why his behavior was unacceptable, and escort him physically out of the space.74

This collective practice reflected a largely unspoken but shared assumption that the best way to create an inclusive, safe space for a variety of individuals to participate in imagining and enacting innovative social relations was to be intolerant of intolerance. In cases where it wasn’t clear who was bothering whom, participants repeatedly took the

74 I use the male pronoun here because, though this practice could theoretically apply to a female visitor as well, in two years of observation the cases were always male visitors.
side of women over men and people of color over native Italians. This practice would seem to reveal a common political imaginary in which subjugated subject positions and the practices or norms they produce are understood as capable of accommodating dominant ones, but not vice versa. In other words, unacceptable behavior was any behavior seen as threatening the safety or active participation of non-dominant subjects through the reproduction of conventional gendered or racial exclusions and hierarchies. In addition to sexual harassment, overt displays of heterosexuality were also treated as unwanted, reflecting a shared conviction that the public enactment of heterosexuality (alongside the use of formal language and male monopolization of speaking time, for instance) works to imbue common space with an exclusive character that hampers the development and expression of non-dominant norms and ways of acting. Through gentle and overt corrections, participants thus sought to eliminate instances of culturally dominant behavior that by its dominance and/or character inhibited other, alternative behaviors in order to create a space where culturally non-dominant behaviors and the subjects performing them could (potentially) exist and flourish.

In one of the many discussions about this, Giovanni, a queer university student and regular participant, insisted on this need to act proactively in filling the space with an anti-sexist character:

we’ve been talking about this for five years, but you can never say enough – the best [strategy] is prevention…we need to do it through flyers, posters, et cetera, use all possible ways to inform [participants] what behavior is not okay – because if there’s a need for a ‘police force’, a repressive organ, there is already a problem. The thing is to intervene beforehand, through communicative means. The point of leaving this to the women is good, rather than men who might make it into an even more testosterone-laden situation.
In his last sentence, Giovanni affirmed a conceptual element that had been implicit in previous comments, the specifically Italian feminist idea that the forms of knowing and acting generated by subjugated social locations such as that of women (and, implied by surrounding dialogue, queer people) can constitute the stepping-off point for more sexually just practice. Once explicitly stated, this idea found support among participants.

However, this notion of gender-specific practices for dealing with sexist behavior in the collective setting potentially conflicted with another shared value expressed in the same discussion, that of self-management through shared responsibility and the Anarchism-derived aim of leaving individuals to regulate their own behavior (within a social context providing shared guidelines for this). When Giovanni suggested that it be women who intervened in unwanted behavior, Paola objected to say, “fine, but aside from the enforcement group, every person can look out for problems, rather than delegating it all to five or six people.” Participants went on to brainstorm various strategies for communicating what behavior was considered unacceptable in a “macho-free” space and encouraging all participants to collaborate in enacting anti-sexist behavior, contingently resolving the potential conflict between these two objectives by agreeing that female and queer participants would take the lead in defining what behavior they felt comfortable with, but all participants would actively contribute to modeling and enforcing shared norms.75

75 The phrase “macho-free zone” is the banner of an ongoing campaign by the SexyShock collective to assert sex-positive feminist space through events and graphic communications campaigns in Bologna.
Part of the reason the issue of enacting anti-sexist practice was so often discussed was that it was never definitively resolved. The signs scattered around the center gave the appearance of firm, defined collective positions regarding sexist, racist, homophobic and fascist behavior, but behind the scenes, the specific content and consequences of these position were never written down or defined in a way that could be taken for granted, rather, they were constantly debated and re-conceptualized. Participants contributed their own interpretations of these concepts and, perhaps even more relevant for daily practice, different ideas of how they should be prioritized or combined in cases of conflict among them.

For instance, participants generally agreed about kicking out a drunken Italian man who was harassing Italian women. However, in cases where it was a migrant man enacting the problematic behavior, the internal tensions and disagreements among XM24 participants were more evident. I observed very similar instances dealt with in somewhat different ways: one night, a pair of Moroccan men in their twenties were dancing very close to a group of young Italian women, bumping into them suggestively despite the women’s repeated efforts (both verbal and non) to communicate that the attention was unwelcome. Two female XM24 participants intervened, leading the Moroccan men away and explaining to them (on the assumption that cross-cultural non-verbal communication varies) that when Italian women move away or push you back it means they are not interested, and that if the men wanted to hang out at XM24 they could not interfere with other visitors’ use of the space. The men indicated through nods and “Si, okay” (yes,

76 For instance, a printed sign in one of the main rooms reads “if you are a fascist/ racist, homophobe or sexist/you are not welcome here! (se sei un fascista/ razza, omofobo o sessista/qui non sei il benvenuto!)"
okay) that they understood, but when about an hour later they were behaving the same way with another group of women, they were forcibly escorted out of the space. Another night, however, a visibly drunk older Senegalese man was standing near the outside bar, attempting to initiate conversation with any of the women who approached the bar. He was very insistent and several times, when women tried to avoid him, he grabbed their hands or arms to keep them from moving away. Several of the XM24 participants working at the bar noticed this, but when I asked one of them if she thought he was causing problems she only shrugged and said that she’d seen him around before, and the female visitors seemed able to deal with it themselves.

There were doubtless multiple factors at play in these cases: whether or not the men were regular visitors at the center and thus known to be more or less problematic, how willing (or able) they appeared to be to understand that their behavior was unacceptable, and possibly Italian participants’ assumptions about gendered norms common in their countries of origins. Nonetheless, I read this inconsistency as reflecting a deliberate choice to leave participants free – if not actually obligated – to take such individual factors into account in assessing each situation by refusing to define a static, singular or comprehensive policy as such. The question of how and when to kick people out of the center was a common topic of discussion, but like so many other highly relevant issues, it was never definitively resolved; or rather, the resolution always boiled down to an agreement that participants must continue developing their ability to consider and weigh the multiple factors involved in each individual situation.

**Anti-fascism: a “weak” conceptual framework for action**

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When I asked participants in interviews, “What do the people of XM24 agree on?”, many laughed. “Nothing!” joked several, or “That’s a good question, isn’t it?” When pressed, the only repeated elements of agreement that interviewees did name without reservation were negatives or shared oppositions: anti-sexism, anti-racism and anti-fascism. As I have argued throughout this chapter, social center participants displayed a marked refusal to establish shared conceptual frameworks in any closed or definitive way and continually re-invented their collective practice. In this they are not alone: a similar principled refusal to define and tolerance for conceptual and methodological multiplicity, many scholars argue, is also a defining characteristic of recent forms of political engagement such as the World Social Forum (WSF). Since its inception in 2001 as a critical alternative to the annual meetings of the elite private economic policy meeting of the World Economic Forum held annually in Davos, Switzerland, the World Social Forum has aimed to bring together a variety of actors working for global justice – social movements, non-governmental organizations and other civil society groups – to discuss and exchange ideas about how to oppose neoliberal globalization.77 The WSF has no foundational ideology or delimited political agenda, no defined institutional identity or membership; anyone may participate, but no one may speak in its name and it refuses to issue final ‘declarations’ or policy documents (Teivainen 2002: 624). The many diverse actors and agendas involved are united only by the assertion that “another world is possible.” This might seem a sparse grounds for

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77 Early participants ranged from the French journal *Le Monde Diplomatique* and French-based civil-sector organization the “Association for the Taxation of Financial Transactions for the Aid of Citizens” to the World Women’s March and the Brazilian Landless Rural Workers movement (Teivainen 2002: 623).
collective action and the formation of alliances, but the WSF has drawn participants from all over the world (the first forum hosted 5,000 registered participants from 117 countries, and the second edition more than doubled this number, inspiring organizers to assert that “from now on Davos will be the shadow event of Porto Alegre” (ibid)) and spawned regional, national and local phenomena such as the European Social Forum, Italian Social Forum and Bologna Social Forum.

Considering this success, we might be inspired to ask, how can such active collective political engagement with such a complex, multi-faceted and widespread phenomena as neoliberal globalization arise from such a minimal common foundation? Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos argues that the strength of the WSF is that it offers a “weak” answer to a “strong” question. The strong question, in this case, is the question of what options exist for individual and collective life and what forces shape these possibilities. A weak answer, according to de Sousa Santos, is one that fails to resolve the “perplexity” (bewilderment and lack of certainty) generated by such a comprehensive, fundamental (aka strong) question. The WSF represents a constructive response to global injustice because, rather than seeking to resolve or disregard this perplexity, it harnesses and is fueled by this perplexity, “transforming the perplexity into an open field of contradictions in which an unfinished and unregulated competition among different possibilities exists,” thus “open[ing] space for social and political innovation” (2008:9). By bringing together multiple groups and foci in a common space of open debate without pre-established limits or definitions, the WSF has helped to make each individual group or movement more aware of the cultural specificity and partial
character of their own knowledge forms and agendas, thus (argues de Sousa Santos) creating “a new need for inter-knowledge, inter-recognition and interaction” in order for groups to engage in effective dialogue, which thereby turns diversity of opinion and perspective into a valuable, desirable resource for social change (12).

Though the authors do not explicitly cite each other, this notion of strong vs. weak answers bears marked similarity to the idea of “weak theory” vs. “strong theory” developed by J.K. Gibson-Graham, drawing on feminist theorist Eve Sedgwick. As Gibson-Graham (2006) propose, strong theory is an approach to knowledge with a comprehensive reach and “a reduced, clarified field of meaning” (4) that seeks to explain everything and “make all phenomena bear on a core thesis” (212n6). By virtue of its reach and capacity for closure, strong theory is appealing in that it “affords the pleasures of recognition, of capture, of intellectually subduing that one last thing” (4). However, as Gibson-Graham argue in relation to strong theory about capitalism, the pitfall of this approach is that, by explaining all existing and potential social phenomena as part of “a consolidating regulative regime” (ibid), it obscures or invalidates actually existing or potential failures, fissures or contradictions as well as emergent alternatives. As a deliberate move to open our eyes to such possibilities, they suggest we approach understanding the economy with weak theory by “reducing its reach and localizing its purview” (7). Weak theory, they argue, allows us to open space in our minds for the recognition or emergence of other possibilities by “acting as beginners” who refuse to already know or understand all that might be encountered. “By exploring the unknown, rather than extending and confirming the known (…) weak theory can be strong politics
– it opens up social options that would be inaccessible to a theorist intent on eliminating surprise” (Gibson-Graham 2006, 205n15). As weak theory does not “automatically judge or discredit other theoretical agendas,” it can help us “[imagine] a terrain on which the success of one project need not come at the expense of another” (8).

Working from the shared elements of these two similar conceptualizations, we might speak more broadly of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ approaches to knowing and to addressing problems: a strong approach is comprehensive in its reach and seeks closure through definition and the resolution of divergent opinions or methodologies. A weak approach, in contrast, draws its strength precisely from the minimalism of its reach and the openness of the ground it establishes for debate and action, a foundation capable of simultaneously entertaining multiple approaches without discrediting any of them a priori. I propose that the conceptualization of anti-fascism developed by social center participants exemplifies such a ‘weak’ approach to the question of how contemporary power works and how can it be opposed, thus functioning as an effective foundation for shared action without offering pre-formed limits on what this action might comprise.

Although ostensibly solely a negative, an opposition, participants collectively defined and treated anti-fascism as a space of possibility, a beginning point for imagining and acting that provided certain taken-for-granted, shared foci, positions and individual habits of action – for instance, against nationalist far right groups, in favor of feminism, queer liberation and racial justice, enacted through egalitarian social relations and individual initiative. This foundation for action did not resolve all possible tensions or disagreements; far from it. Rather, participants understood anti-fascism in action as
requiring and valorizing open debate and the existence of divergent opinions and positions, in contrast with the coercive resolution of disagreement and forced unity characteristic of a fascist mindset or political-cultural system.

It is important to note that, for participants, fascism was understood as more than a specific historical period or movement (i.e. Fascism); in discussion and published texts, they defined fascism as a comprehensive mode of organizing thought and action based on gender-specific authoritarian and nationalist (thus culturally, ethnically, racially, religiously exclusive) logics – in other words, as the concrete manifestations of a strong approach or answer. As a participant declared at a public anti-fascist event in 2008, “what characterizes all manifestations of Fascism in all its different places is an intolerance for diversity.” The specific content participants associated with anti-fascism and the way it provided a basis for shared action was illustrated by the development and implementation of a 5-day-long event called the Social Festival of Anti-fascist Cultures (Festival Sociale delle Culture Antifasciste) that participants organized beginning in 2009 at a former army barracks at the edge of the city. The first festival program opened with a quote from Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922-75), gay Italian filmmaker and internationally renowned iconoclast: “Italy is rotting away in a state of wellbeing that is selfishness, stupidity, lack of culture, gossip, moralism, coercion, conformism: at this point, lending oneself in any way to this putrefaction constitutes fascism (September 6, 1962).” Linking past and present, participants argued that Italian society is even worse now than when Pasolini described it; they go on to describe new manifestations of neo-fascism that “seek to reconstruct social legitimacy using imaginaries and slogans of the political-institutional ideology of
‘security’ that simplifies, hides, mystifies and propagandizes racist myths and instigates social hate” (festival program 2009). The definition participants gave to anti-fascism thus brought together modes of thinking and acting opposed to homogeny of all kinds, coercive authority and hierarchical power relations.

In their countless open meetings and informal conversations, participants acknowledged that this understanding of fascism was not necessarily commonsense among their potential audience. In fact, an important aim of the event was precisely to diffuse an analysis of local, national and global trends and processes, from environmental destruction to immigrant detention and expulsion, from restrictive gender norms to historical revisionism, as having a shared foundation in a fascist political imaginary, that is to say a totalizing, exclusive and coercive mode of organizing political, economic and social relations. With this conceptualization of fascism as a common organizing logic underpinning many diverse processes and trends, event organizers hoped to encourage attendees and participants to recognize links between multiple forms of concrete and conceptual opposition to fascism, what they termed anti-fascist cultures or practices.

Though this collective project of defining contemporary anti-fascism focused largely on current historical forces, it also reflected a strong and shared desire to valorize and make use of the specific historical heritage of Italian anti-fascism, especially (but not limited to) WWII resistance movements. As mentioned in Chapter 3, founding XM24 participants formed a relationship with the local chapter of ANPI, the National Association of Italian Partisans, a group formed at the end of the war and dedicated to archiving, valorizing and reproducing historical accounts of the key role played by
underground resistance fighters in freeing Italy from Fascism and their right, gained through this contribution, to participate in the (political and institutional) reconstruction of the country. In 2008-2010, during my fieldwork, many XM24 participants were officially registered members of the ANPI organizations, and through joint events organized between the social center and Bolognina ANPI chapter sought to create discursive connections between the legacy of the Italian resistance, a symbol of courageous dissent and national democratic ideals, and their multi-faceted, globally attentive conceptualization of contemporary anti-fascism.

The content of the festival was constructed through a series of open meetings and online discussion. The meetings began with participants from XM24 and a handful of other groups active in the city with whom XM participants felt affinity; from the beginning, however, participants sought to enlarge the process of organizing to include other groups and organizations they had not worked with before but who might be interested in the event. It was important, participants agreed, that the event not be associated too closely with specific elements of the Italian Left (e.g. the social center scene, partisans’ organizations, Antagonism, or Communism) lest it thereby exclude potential contributors and conceptions of contemporary anti-fascism. As Francesco argued at the third open meeting:

We don’t want to risk it being only Antagonism or limited, so the document on the [mailing] list opens with a quote from Pasolini – it’s not traditional antifascism, not the helmeted militants usually meant by antifa. We have to throw out the old ideas and put forward new ones… I like the idea of thematic tables, each one with a different new way to react to fascism – for example the LGBTQ community is not only beaten up by skinheads, it is a victim of the whole social fabric that prevents it from expressing itself as it would like. Logistically, we need
Francesco argued that, in order to open a space for multiple potential participants, organizers needed to dismantle the perceived connection between anti-fascism and a particular political tradition; rather than deepening established understandings of fascism and its opposition(s), they needed to “take a step back and listen.” Manifesting what I would call a ‘weak’ approach, participants used meetings and online discussion to work out a very minimal, open-ended yet suggestive shared conceptualization of contemporary anti-fascism and the practices through which it could be implemented, namely consensus-based, non-hierarchical self-management and the diffusion of heterogeneous cultural and communicative products. As Alberto explained at the third meeting:

Militant actions with helmeted protesters, big marches don’t work anymore – and may even be counter-productive. The response to this young fascist movement needs to be cultural, of ways of thinking, the creation of diffuse antifa thinking…because they are changing the culture, media, consumption habits, etcetera. At this moment, when Communism is an insult, also antifa is becoming an issue – they are trying to rewrite history and condition public opinion. This process is very powerful, and we need to fight it on this level of culture, communication – that treatment that people get after they have been brainwashed, that’s what the Italian people need.

One participant suggested that the event could either take place in multiple sites around the city, or condensed in a single site over multiple days. While meeting attendees agreed that the former option would result in a higher public profile for the event and contribute to the aim of communicating more broadly, it was finally decided that the second option
was preferable because it would allow participants to maintain constant contact, to talk both within and outside of formal discussion fora and, most importantly, would represent an opportunity to model how consensus-based, non-hierarchical self-management can work in the real world outside the physical space of a social center.

From the very first meeting where XM24 participants began to conceive of the social festival of anti-fascist cultures, the issue of anti-sexism was central to discussion; however, with no pre-defined or institutionalized definition of this, participants had to build consensus about how an anti-sexist environment would be achieved while at the same time establishing a shared conceptualization of feminist practice. In one of the many discussion, Paola suggested that the festival be equipped with a designated point (a tent, always occupied) where people could come with concerns or issues. Several male participants voiced their agreement, saying that the space should be “covered in flyers – everything we can do to make the people understand that crap can’t exist here. At a meeting of anti-fascist cultures, if we can’t make it safe for everyone we are a complete failure, so we need to work ahead of time in every way to ensure [nothing happens].” A some-time male participant, a man who was active in other projects in Bologna but rarely at XM24, suggested that there could be a designated group to patrol the campgrounds, but a male regular participant interrupted to say, “We can’t just have a bunch of militant comrades – apart from the fact that plenty of comrades have problems with sexism, but anyway it should be a lot of different people, not making it the task of only a few.” By suggesting both a set of positions (against sexism, for instance) as well as a (contingently defined yet broadly shared) mode of practice, the definition participants developed of
anti-fascism helped them to combine multiple aims (that of feminist practice and the diffusion of responsibility, for instance) into a relatively coherent and largely shared platform for action.

In past historical moments an open-ended, minimal platform such as “another world is possible” may not have excited much action; indeed, conventional political movements have been built on more comprehensive and coherent ideological foundations. However, global neoliberalism maintains its hegemony in large part, de Sousa Santos (2005) reminds us, through discrediting all possible alternatives from the realm of the thinkable or doable. Potential opponents to globalized neoliberal capitalism in the form of the electoral or established Left mainly agree that the sheer comprehensive scope and discursive dominance of the current system render it unassailable, and thus all that seems reasonable to hope for is more of the same. The political Left in many countries has thus moved toward the center, seeking pragmatic, “realist” positions rather than “utopic” searches for substantive alternatives. The WSF – and, I would argue, the anti-fascism being developed by Italian social centers influenced by this form of engagement – is so energizing and attractive to participants precisely because it affirms that alternatives can exist, a message which is more important and engaging in the current historical context than any substantive definition of those alternatives would be.

Listening to the transcripts of interviews I conducted with social center participants, the negatives of anti-sexism, anti-racism, and anti-fascism might indeed seem like little or nothing on which to build shared practices and imaginaries. Observing and participating in their everyday activities, however, it is clear that not only are they
asserting such a space of possibility, a space of open debate and exchange where multiple visions of the present and future can coexist; they are also constantly working to fill it. Unlike the WSF and other manifestations of the global justice movement, such as counter-summits, whose existence is constituted through globally networks of like-minded actors linked by information technologies and occasionally physical encounters (Juris 2008), social center participants interact every day within an established physical space. They not only have the chance to construct a specific content for their “alternative world,” they are practically obliged to do so in order to meet the everyday requirements of collectively running the center. I would argue that anti-fascism provides a shared conceptual basis from which to build this contested and always-in-progress alternative set of practices and habits of thought by asserting the value and legitimacy of open debate in the face of the emotional or psychological strain that might arise from continually re-addressing and re-defining key issues without the prospect of definitive resolution.

As fascism is understood as a “strong” or comprehensive, exclusive and totalizing mode (or set of modes) for organizing social, political and economic relations, a political imaginary broadly speaking that is recognized to function through aesthetic channels and cultural logics, forms of knowledge and habits of thought, the antidote is of anti-fascism is ”weak,” humble and minimal in its assertions and reach; where fascism is understood as repressing diversity and debate, anti-fascism is enacted through networking between diverse groups and agendas, through opening the table of discussion as broadly as possible and harnessing the resulting heterogeneity as a resource (a “cultural weapon,” in Alberto’s words) in and of itself. Specific barriers to inclusive participation and diverse
individual expression are identified and removed to allow something else to grow in the place of conventional cultural norms and social relations, something with contours and suggestive aims but not pre-figured limits. Anti-fascism thus suggests a shared foundation for positive action by rejecting cultural logics and systems of categorization that homogenize or hierarchically order individuals in order to remove obstacles to participation and individual self-realization so that new, inclusive or egalitarian logics and social relations can be built in their place.

**Ethnographic positioning within a field of “knowledge-practices”**

At the outset of my research period, after hanging around XM24 for a few weeks working up the nerve, I followed Alberto’s suggestion and came to a weekly meeting to present my research project and ask activists if they would be willing to let me observe and record what they did and said, including meeting discussions. I specified that I would not use real names and would happily leave out any individuals who didn’t want to be included, but no one voiced such concerns. “Another research project on XM!” commented an older man, and several people laughed. I was expecting questions such as, (how much) was I going to get in the way? Or, what would I expect from participants? Instead, the only question was from a younger Italian women (I later found out she was studying sociology at the University of Bologna) who asked me which software I was planning to use to code my field notes, because she had heard there were some new ones available.

As I chatted with people after the meeting and in the subsequent weeks, answering questions and introducing myself to participants, I received similar reactions.
A few people asked very specific technical questions about my methods and theoretical framework, but no one voiced the least concern or confusion about my stated intention to combine participation in the daily activities of the center with interested data collection within the framework of an institutionally structured research project. I had resolved to be attentive to possible role conflicts of this sort and to use any conflicts that did arise as data to be analyzed. As data, I argue that the marked lack of such conflicts and participants’ uncomplicated acceptance of my multiple role adoption reflects two linked characteristics of participants’ political practice: their focus on and valorization of reflexive analysis and knowledge production as a component of everyday activity at the center, and their close ties to institutionalized spheres of knowledge production (e.g. the news media, university, and publishing industry).

Alongside the concrete, logistical work of center management and maintenance, participants conceptualized the experiment of self-management as requiring a continual collective effort to analyze and critique what they were doing. Every problem that arose, from a mess left in the kitchen to a media campaign by neighborhood politicians against the center, was treated as an opportunity to discuss what went wrong and theorize from the specific to the general in order to reflexively adapt their collective practice. As illustrated by the discussions I describe above, much of this collective theorization took place through the weekly meeting (and associated email discussion list), but it was also evident in everyday processes of decision-making and communication among participants and between participants and visitors. It is important to note, however, that knowledge production was not treated as an end in and of itself, but rather as an
inseparable component of collective practice in which no separation or prioritization was made between developing new political and social imaginaries, identifying concrete practices through which to create these imaginaries, acting out these innovative practices within the space of the center and critiquing the entire process as it occurred.

This dimension of practice is certainly not unique to XM24 or social centers. Among social movement scholars, meaning-making and knowledge mobilization are (once again) recognized as key components of participants’ everyday practice, as social movement scholar Charles Kurzman describes in his introduction to a special issue of *Anthropology Quarterly* dedicated to “meaning making in social movements” (2008 81(1)). In a co-authored paper in this volume, María Casas-Cortés, Michal Osterweil and Dana E. Powell propose the term “knowledge-practices” to refer to the diverse yet situated and embodied practices through which social movement participants produce, reformulate, mobilize and diffuse forms of knowledge (2008:19-20). This sphere of practice is increasingly central to contemporary social movements such as the anti-globalization movement, and the authors argue that it may represent a significant, if long underestimated or neglected, component of social movements in general which deserves more attention than it has so far enjoyed. The traditional neglect of activists’ knowledge production in social movement studies, notes Kurzman, may arise in part from professional territoriality, in that social movement actors’ self-analyses and contributions to scientific debates put them into potential competition with academic knowledge producers, giving professional scholars a vested interest in “downplaying activist
knowledge-production or segregating this knowledge-production as an object of analysis that is distinct from their own scholarly acts of analysis” (2008:7).

On the other hand, my experiences with global justice struggles in the US and queer activism in the US and the UK suggest that activists themselves may be equally vested in reproducing a distinction between institutionalized academic and activist intellectual activity. Activists proudly recounted their decisions to eschew formal higher education in favor of ”actually doing something,” criticized academics for excessive abstraction or theorizing as an end in itself, and represented activist-produced knowledge in contrast as less mediated and abstract and thus more useful. In the field of Italian social center practice, however, I did not encounter efforts to establish and reproduce the opposition between theory and practice that underlies this distinction between activist and academic knowledge production. Social center participants in general did not see their practice as distinct or removed from academic knowledge production or recognize a firm boundary between the meaning-making and critical reflection carried out through discussion and texts (debates, book presentations, flyers, posters, public statements, documentary videos, etc.) at the social center and that carried out by academics – both within and outside of the center – through institutional conferences or publishing channels.

Indeed, as Gramsci’s notion of the organic intellectual suggests, the Italian political Left has a strong tradition of intellectualism both within and outside of institutional spheres, predating but concretized through the post-WWII unofficial but widely recognized “compromise” through which the Christian Democrats took control of
electoral politics but ceded control of the organs of intellectual and cultural production to the Communist Party of the time. Both within the universities, newspapers and publishing houses and outside of them, in sites such as the Case del Popolo, political self-education and collective theorizing was a key distinguishing feature of the Left at all levels of formal education. Though social centers were born from efforts to free far left political theorizing and cultural activity from party control, contemporary activists nonetheless locate themselves in this tradition of left intellectualism that deliberately supersedes distinctions of institutional vs. non-institutional or professional vs. lay.

Furthermore, individual participants themselves often move freely between these spheres: many are positioned such that they have direct access to sites of professional or institutional knowledge production (students, professors, journalists, published writers, etc.). In the Left-dominated city of Bologna, far left ties were a professional resource rather than liability, and the ‘leftist credentials’ of many professional intellectuals, their credibility in professional and extra-institutional spheres alike, benefited from their valuing and maintaining ties with spheres of political practice such as social centers.\(^78\) The power differential between researcher and subject based on unequal access to spaces of expertise or channels of knowledge diffusion was thus irrelevant in this setting. My position as an ethnographer was both banal to the point of redundancy and absolutely non-suspicious – there was never a moment in which I felt participants encouraging me to “please tell our story” or, on the other hand, to “be careful how you tell our story”

\(^{78}\) Of the participants who are also university students, many have written their theses on Bologna social centers or related issues or phenomena and Bologna professors often voice public support for social center initiatives as well as occasionally focusing on them as sites of research.
because they were already telling their own story much more broadly and with more local credibility than I ever could.

In studying highly politically charged fields or sites of political dissent, there is perhaps an even greater potential for ethnographers to find that their political/ethical and professional interests or allegiances coincide. Against the grain of historical notions of intellectual objectivity or research detachment, multiple scholars have proposed ethical positions and/or ethnographic methodologies to harness and valorize this coincidence and to fight back against the imagined “sacred boundary (…) between scholarship and commitment” (Bourdieu 2003: 24) that so often shapes professional academic habitus, from Scheper-Hughes’ politically engaged “militant anthropology” (1995) to Hyatt and Lyon-Callo’s collaborative “activist anthropology” (2003). Social movement scholars have led recent efforts in this direction. In his study of globally networked movements against corporate globalization, Jeffrey Juris argues for an ethnographic methodology of “militant ethnography” in order to “produce ethnographic accounts that are rigorous and useful for activists” (2008:19, italics in original). Once we recognize the important roles social movement actors play in producing knowledge, argue Casas-Cortés et al (2008), we as researchers cannot help but consider a different position, one of studying with social movements in a collaborative exercise. In the case of Bologna social centers, I found this position not only useful but nearly inevitable. Through my active participation in center activities my own research agenda gradually shifted to incorporate concerns and issues identified by participants, just as my ongoing efforts at analysis were fueled and shaped by our collective efforts to reflect on center practice. Though participants did not
make specific requests of me, I also made changes in my data collection to better contribute to ongoing projects of self-analysis, documentation and theorization – for instance, I developed questions for the survey of casual visitors together with interested participants, which shaped the questions I asked and who I spoke with.

I did certainly experience moments of disorientation or the sensation of being asked to move quickly between multiple roles. When discussing a quotation from Foucault, how it fit with his larger theories on biopower and its relevance to the current historical moment in collectively drafting an opening statement for the “social festival of anti-fascist cultures” program, my roles as participant, ethnographer and professional academic felt quite seamless. At certain moments, like in a discussion of what text to put on banners for an upcoming march against homophobia, my own background in queer activism seemed to count more than my academic credentials; however, the many CSOA participants who shared this multi-faceted background conceptualized the two as naturally synergetic and not in conflict, and seemed to expect the same from me. At other moments, like when participants analyzed local politics, I felt like an observer rather than participant. However, a significant proportion of the participants were likewise not from Bologna (and a few were from outside Italy); together we listened to more knowledgeable locals and those with closer links to political institutions, and compared notes in an effort to map the complex, shifting relations that constitute the local political scene. In this I was no different from any other participant whose multiple roles and identities were contextually invoked within a setting – as argued above – with a non-ideologically-unified character that made space for all participants to simultaneously
maintain these multiple positions, roles and allegiances. In fact, this tolerance or even celebration of heterogeneity on the part of participants can be read as a component of the alternative political imaginary being constructed at the center, and central to what makes participants’ model of citizenship alternative.

**The XM24 Thursday market: an interface with the public**

Social center participants often describe these spaces as ‘laboratories’ wherein alternative political subjectivities, ways of relating and innovative political analyses are formulated and experimented. However, unlike conventional laboratories where access is restricted to authorized personnel and potentially patentable inventions are held under lock and key, social centers are deliberately porous sites, seeking through multiple channels to circulate and diffuse their innovative ‘products’ – critiques, analyses, practices, ways of imagining political engagement – outside the physical spaces of the centers. Every public event, be it a debate, concert, party or meeting, is a potential moment of interface with the public in the form of the visitors who enter the space and participate in the event. The farmer’s market held every Thursday evening at XM24 offers a window onto this moment of encounter and the reception of social center messages among the visiting public.

The farmer’s market opens around 5:30 p.m. and, entering through the large black-and-fuchsia front gate (currently hung with a large, water-proof banner naming the center and listing all its constitutive projects), shoppers pass about a dozen stalls offering seasonal produce, cheese, wine and baked products. Many of the products are organic,
but that is not the main criteria for inclusion: all the sellers are small-scale Bologna-area agricultural producers selling their own products, part of a collective called Campi Aperti (Open Fields) aimed at promoting local consumption of local products and opposing national and regional regulations which they see as disadvantaging small-scale production in relation to larger corporate operations. The collective manages this part of the market in terms of deciding who is included and establishing regulations for participants through their own separate organizational meetings.

Passing further into the center, under the enormous metal and glass awning that is a relic of the space’s former existence as a commercial fruit and vegetable market, the atmosphere changes. The cheerful, relatively clean open-air market of the local producers gives way to an area that resembles an industrial encampment, a large concrete-floored space filled with scavenged chairs and tables. On one side is a bar, and around the edge are informational tables for the current projects being pursued by XM24 participants. There are also stalls selling things like hand-made clothes and jewelry, environmentally friendly soaps and organic coffee. If the selection seems haphazard, that’s because it reflects political aims developed through the rigorous discussion of multiple weekly meetings. These tables reflect not profit-seeking but project-ness: at one table a young woman in a long floral skirt sells cloth shopping bags made from used clothing, as an alternative to plastic grocery bags, while at another a young man with spiky hair sells hand-made pins featuring political slogans and images from the Italian underground – for one euro, I bought one showing an activist being beaten by a police officer that reads “greetings from Genoa, wish you were here” in reference to the 2001 anti-G8 protests.
The coffee is organically shade-grown by small producers in Mexico and processed by a social cooperative based in Germany; the resulting product is sold through Coordinadora, a network of local, autonomous Italian organizations inspired by the methods and aims of the Zapatista uprising. A group of activists at XM24 who pursue various projects in Mexico and Latin America through the collective Osservatorio sull’America Latina are connected to this network, and the sale of coffee is one of the projects through which they raise money for their activities, including sending Bologna-based activists to sites in Latin America. A printout shows the detailed breakdown of the coffee price, from cultivation through processing and packaging, so that buyers can see how profits are distributed.

Like the market stalls, the bar reflects political-ethical considerations as much if not more than economic ones and multiple signs and practices are aimed at communicating these considerations to visitors. Though the bar is a primary source of funding for the center, it is not run as a profit-making enterprise so much as an experiment in modeling and communicating about what participants call “critical consumption” and elsewhere is called ethical consumption, a model of choosing and organizing consumption to prioritize social, environmental and political considerations over low prices for the consumer. All bar workers are volunteers, and the money from the bar goes into a central account to run the center (i.e. bills for electricity, gas and the internet connection) as well as to finance projects pursued through the center (i.e. subsidizing travel expenses for activists doing projects in Latin America or buses to take
activists to protests in other cities/countries, paying to print flyers, paying bands or theater groups who come to give performances).

The center is itself a consumer, and participants seek to use this role to explore possibilities for critical consumption. At one meeting we all sampled different beers to decide if the bar should carry them, and participants agreed on several beers made by local, small-scale producers even though they cost more than the suppliers the bar had used in the past. Customers often ask for hard alcohol and these products are much more profitable than beer, but the bar only carries a few options because activists want to encourage socializing rather than heavy drinking and the kind of disruptive behavior that can accompany it. The activists also decided several years ago not to offer bottled water; instead, they hand people cups and direct them to a faucet around the corner. Concerned about the amount of waste produced by the center’s bar, an XM participant researched multiple options to find cups made of corn starch that, though they cost more, can be composted or burned cleanly in the wood stove that heats several of the upstairs rooms. A sign above the bar explains about these biodegradable cups and requests that customers leave a fifty cent deposit for each cup, to ensure that they are returned to the bar to be disposed of properly instead of ending up in the regular garbage.

For the first hour or so after the market opens, it is full of visitors focused on grocery shopping, most over 30 y.o. with mainstream haircuts, make-up and clothing styles, a demographic noticeably different from the visitors common at late-night parties and concerts at XM24. In surveying these visitors, I was especially interested in what brings them to the market and how they view the space of XM24. In the variety of
answers I collected, some patterns stood out and I would like to present three examples that illustrate the different kinds of motivations and backgrounds that characterize Thursday market shoppers.

I approached Patrizia, 78 y.o., as she was waiting in line at a fruit and vegetable stand. She has been a resident of Bolognina, the neighborhood hosting XM24, since the early 1950s, when she came to live with her husband, a warehouse worker at a small, family owned textile wholesaler. A high school graduate, she worked informally making fresh pasta for a neighborhood restaurant and raised three children. She comes to the Thursday market, she explained, because it’s near her house and the products are authentic (genuini), but she couldn’t do all her shopping there because the prices are too high for her limited retirement income. She laughed when I asked her if she would bring her kids. “I don’t bring them anywhere, they’re all big now! But my daughter sometimes comes on her own, when she’s visiting.” She said that she never attended other events at XM24. “They’re not for someone like me. In the evening, I’m usually at home.” When asked if there was anything she’d change about the market, she pointed out a lack of hygienic measures: “Some of the sellers don’t use gloves, and they are smoking and touching the merchandise. We [pasta makers at the restaurant] would never do that.” I asked her if there was anything she wanted to add, and she replied: “there’s something to add about [this] neighborhood. The neighborhood has a rich history of worker’s movements and factories.” She looked up, through the center’s main gate at the busy corner market across the street and the four or five young Senegalese men hanging
around outside it. “Unfortunately, recently it’s been changing.” I thanked her, and she walked away pulling her brightly colored nylon shopping bag on wheels.

Tommaso, a 58 y.o. lawyer, also lives in Bolognina and comes to the market on his way home from work. He comes because he likes “this kind of product – it is authentic [genuine], not easy to find. And to support an initiative that I consider positive.” The physical structures of the stalls, he notes, could be better; otherwise, the only improvement would be some live music, like a street musician or something. He has never attended other XM24 events: “I wouldn’t know what they are” but told me that he sometimes brings his children to the market with him. “Some people wouldn’t set foot here, because of the dirt and everything – the dogs – but they are missing out on some great products. I see no problem with bringing them [my children].”

Leaving Tommaso to choose among the sheep milk cheeses, I approached a sharply dressed couple carrying canvas shopping bags over their fitted suit jackets. Giulio, 39 y.o. and Nicola, 41 y.o., are not married but live together in a neighborhood on the other side of the city. Like Tommaso, they come to the market after work; Giulio works as an IT technician at the University of Bologna and Nicola as a receptionist at a dental office. They come to the market, Nicola explained, “because I believe that the products are organic, natural, high-quality.” in addition to the XM24 farmer’s market, they also regularly shop at the corporate natural food store chain. They don’t come to other XM24 events – “I don’t know when they are, what there is,” explained Nicola. “We just come for groceries,” agreed Giulio. They don’t have children, but aren’t sure they would bring them if they did: “I’m not sure it would be safe,” said Giulio. “In what
sense?” I asked. “In terms of…well…the dirtiness and disorder [sporcizia e confusione],” he explained. “It’s not a family kind of place.”

Many of the shoppers I surveyed shared this conceptualization of the farmer’s market as a positive phenomenon, both for the consumption choices it offers as well as the ethical-political values it represents, but very few of them reported interest in other events or initiatives at XM24. For them, the setting (both in the physical sense of the structures and grounds as well as the larger sense of the autonomous, anti-institutional space of the social center) was at best a symbolic frame underlining the ethical-political character of the market and at worse an inconvenience to be endured. They were willing to enter the space to access to hard-to-find food products, and many expressed sympathy with the values of solidarity, cooperation and constructive collective engagement they saw the center as representing, but they were not interested in exploring or participating in other facets of center activity.

Later in the evening, as the stalls begin to close, people arrive for an aperitivo (pre-dinner drink and snacks). The aperitivo crowd is generally younger than the shoppers, about two thirds under thirty and only a few noticeably over 50 y.o. While the shoppers tend to move purposely from stall to stall, in the bar area people sit or stand to chat in couples or small groups. They are relatively balanced in terms of gender, with only slightly fewer women than men, and, while the market area is nearly exclusively used by native Italians, the bar area is often used by Senegalese and North African men, most in their mid-twenties or thirties, who habitually occupy two different corners of the
inner bar area; besides these regular visitors, pairs or small groups of Pakistani men, resident in the neighborhood, often pass through.

The responses I gathered from people using the bar area later in the evening also differed from those of the shoppers. Three Italian university students, two women aged 19, and 23 y.o. and a man 20 y.o., reported coming frequently to the center, several times a week; in addition to the Thursday market, they also came to concerts and parties. None of them come to shop at the farmer’s market, they told me, because the prices are too high and the range too limited. For groceries, they go to whatever corporate supermarket is closer or cheaper, regardless of ethical or political concerns. Although they don’t use the market, however, two of them identified it as part of what gave the evening social and political value: “it’s nice [bello], a space managed autonomously, with local producers. It’s important for there to be alternatives to the commercial supermarket,” replied one of them, while another praised the evening for bringing together “different people, including people who would not otherwise come to a place like XM, residents and older people. It’s an occasion for exchange.”

At another table, I talked to two men in their early twenties, cousins, one born in Senegal and the other in Italy to an Italian mother and Senegalese father. They both said they regularly visited both XM and other Bologna social centers for parties, workshops and the legal aid services in addition to the market, but they never missed a Thursday. “I was brought up with this kind of thing [markets]” one told me, and his cousin added that he likes to hang out at markets for their mix of people. Though one of them praised the organic products available, they explained that didn’t come to shop, but to socialize. One
of them described coming to the XM market every Thursday even in the past, when he lived in a town 1.5 hours away: “There I knew no one, so I came here to socialize. There it was impossible to meet people, they don’t give a shit about you. I know other people in Mantova who come here to hang out, too.” His cousin added, “It [the market evening] has a slower tempo, people take time to discuss, it is a good counterbalance to our accelerated system of today, a moment of tranquility.” Unlike the shoppers, the visitors using the bar area later in the evening thus described coming not for the products as much as for the setting itself, seen as offering an alternative to dominant cultural-political values and contemporary capitalist ways of being.

In describing the appeal of this alternative space, visitors to the bar area often used the term tranquillo. Though this term literally means tranquil or peaceful, visitors used it in another, more figurative and generationally specific sense meaning “laid-back” or “permissive.” They enthusiastically praised the hands-off approach of XM24 participants and the liberated, enjoyable environment it produced: “I like the environment, the tolerance appeals to me,” explained a 29 y.o. engineer. “You can bring your own food or beer, and no one cares!” enthused a 38 y.o. freelance journalist. “There’s no pressure to buy anything, you can just hang out.” Especially in the case of migrants, who are often singled out for surveillance and police controls on the basis of physical or linguistic traits regardless of their legal or citizenship status (Andall 2002), this perception of ‘permissiveness’ was generated in part by participants’ deliberate efforts to make the space of the center welcoming for everyone by making it especially welcoming for populations and practices that were less welcome in other public or
in institutional spaces. Although native Italian young people interested in drinking and making noise late at night were not necessarily the intended recipients of this permissiveness, they appreciated the environment that was created through participants’ efforts to disrupt and replace dominant norms and exclusions.

To better understand the appeal of this unstructured and permissive environment, it can be juxtaposed with another public space in Bologna popular with young people, Piazza Giuseppe Verdi in the University district. Piazza Verdi is widely recognized as a symbolically key site of interface between collective political and cultural dissent and the forces of law and order, and it continues to be a site of heated contestation over divergent conceptualizations of what public space is for and how it should be used. On one hand, students and other young people seek to gather there, seated on the paving stones to drink, snack and socialize. On the other hand, some residents, policy-makers and local authorities identify certain uses of the space (drug selling and consumption, unleashed dogs, seated people blocking thoroughfares, the noise of talking or music after a certain hour) as examples of “urban blight” that must be eliminated to promote economic growth in the area. In the last decade, a permanent police presence has been established in the form of multiple parked vehicles and regular foot patrols, surveillance cameras installed,

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79 Along with a half dozen other piazzas and streets in Bologna, Piazza Verdi has been repeatedly identified as a “hot spot” of blight. It has been the target of specific security campaigns and actions since the late 1990s, accelerated under the term of Sergio Cofferati, mayor of Bologna from 2004 to 2009, as part of his campaign in favor of legality. As a symbol of both blight and intervention, Piazza Verdi has been repeatedly re-fashioned as each new municipal administration uses it to showcase their own distinctive strategies of governance; in the time I’ve lived nearby, the street leading through the piazza has been variously closed, restricted and (re)opened to traffic while the piazza itself has been partially or completely gutted and overhauled multiple times. Not coincidentally, the piazza also holds an important place in local history as the site of some of the most dramatic clashes between police forces and student protesters during the student movements of the late 1970s.
and a law passed to prohibit seated occupation of the piazza. In 2006, a political and cultural event organized by a politically left student group that had taken place in the piazza several years running was prohibited by police authorities; when students gathered anyway in protest, the city prosecutor opened a case against four of them.

The character and use of the piazza has also been shaped in a more mundane but no less significant way by the addition of certain built or temporary structures. The city has installed multiple short cement pillars that serve as seating but which also structure the space in certain ways, discouraging the formation of large seated groups and encouraging people to congregate on foot around the cement features. There are two bars that face onto the piazza, and both have built seating areas in the piazza itself, demarcated with planter boxes, decorative fences, etc. that, together with the large commercial and marketing structures (e.g. tables advertising internet/cell phone providers, a blow-up castle advertising a fast food delivery service, etc.) that are permitted to occupy the piazza on most days, reduce the amount of space that can be used flexibly while structuring the space into differentiated zones of commercial consumption. At XM24, in contrast, very little about the space is constrained or rigid. Physically, nearly all the furniture and structuring elements are left free to be moved and rearranged by participants and visitors alike); there is no mechanical surveillance and the limited unwritten rules that participants enforce – no gender-based, racist or other violence, no hard drug use or selling – function to facilitate rather than regulate or repress the use visitors want to make of the space, which is mainly chatting, drinking, smoking late into
the night. As one visitor to XM explained, “I come here to spend a nice evening in Bologna without the fear of police patrols.”

Though visitors may primarily have recognized the market’s lack of restrictions, for participants it had a more constructive purpose: communicating with the public and promoting both specific projects and the overall political imaginary they seek to build. Individual projects such as the InfoShock media space, bike repair workshop and queer group often hosted tables within the bar area, usually with flyers or other material describing current projects and participants on hand to speak with anyone who approaches. Starting in 2008, for example, the queer group Frangette Estreme launched a campaign to encourage non-believers who were baptized at birth to remove themselves from the official ranks of Catholic faithful by requesting an annulment of baptismal registry. Using the Thursday market (together with periodic parties) as a staging ground, the Sbatteziamoci! (Let’s un-baptize ourselves!) table was fun and ironic, draped in tulle and streamers and with participants dressed up in an irreverent, garish version of ecclesiastical garb. On the table, there were pens and stacks of pre-written letters (prepared with the help of a lawyer) with instructions for visitors to fill out and send off to their local parish. Participants envisioned it as a service of sorts. As Giovanni explained,

this is important because the church counts its followers according to baptism, which is something that happens before you can decide for yourself. A lot of people don’t support the church, but it continues to count them. You are counted

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80 This action was also part of a larger campaign active since 2007 by a network of local feminist, secular, queer and transsexual groups across Italy called “No-Vat,” aimed at defending and freeing civil society from the influence of the Vatican and opposing the Catholic Church as a force of social control, political corruption and economic inequality.
unless you do something about it. But who knows how? It’s a complicated bureaucratic process. They are counting on people’s ignorance and inaction. We want to help people act, and show that it [the Catholic church] doesn’t have the support it claims.

One Thursday evening near the beginning of the campaign, a number of visitors came to the table to fill out letters at the same time. Participants were handing out letters right and left, and when one visitor joked that “we on the Left really lack a sense of ceremony…won’t you give me a blessing?”, the “priest” manning the table began improvising a satirical reverse baptismal rite for each individual: “I declare you free of the church’s hypocritical rule,” “Now you have to think for yourself!” and “One less for the Church’s statistics!” participants were told as they signed letters and received an “anointment” of lukewarm beer.81

With its colorful murals, barrage of signage and air of creatively re-fashioned urban disintegration, it would be difficult to mistake XM24 for a conventional institutional or commercial space. Even for those who use it primarily as a site of consumption, it is clear that the setting carries certain associations. If visitors are equipped and willing to read it through the lens of the well-known history of far left counter-cultural movements in Italy, its characteristic physical and aesthetic elements take on even clearer oppositional political significance. In a way, the obviously hand-made or ad hoc appearance and construction characteristic of so many CSOA, from handwritten signs and cobbled-together stages to scavenged furniture haphazardly arranged, serves to underline the distinctive characteristics of the sites, namely their

81 A noi della sinistra manca davvero un spirito di cerimonia…mi daresti una benedizione?/ Ti dichiaro libero dal dominio ipocrita della chiesa!/ Ora devi pensare per conto tuo!/ Uno in meno per le statistiche della chiesa!
autonomy from institutional or commercial spheres and the activity of self-management through which they are run.

**Autonomy and self-management in the neoliberal present: distinguishing practice-based participation at CSOA from third-sector volunteerism**

I have argued and illustrated how the sense of belonging experienced by CSOA participants is generated through day to day practice in the collective pursuit of collectively defined political goals. The idea of praxis, that is the concrete enactment of theoretical stances and political objectives through everyday action, is not of course new to CSOA; it has been central to dissenting political movements in Italy (and elsewhere) since Marxists and Anarchists struggled side by side for worker self-determination in the 19th century and a primary principle of Anarcho-syndicalism (Rocker 2004: 73). Praxis has enjoyed pride of place among Italian Anarchist movements. In fact, a primary reason why Italian Anarcho-syndicalists split off from the institutional labor movement at the turn of the century was their conviction that rank-and-file workers must be directly, actively involved in decision making processes in order to develop their agency and build horizontal social and economic relations (Pernicone 1993). The centrality of praxis also re-emerged in Italian student/worker/women’s movements of the 1970s, for instance in the auto-reduction campaign in which people took it into their own hands to literally enact the changes they wanted to see in the world. CSOA participants clearly draw on these historical traditions in developing their vision of active and horizontal participation as both an end in itself and a means to collective belonging.
At the present moment, unpaid collective activity for unselfish ends has once again been pushed to the forefront of many conceptualizations of good citizenship as part of the growth of the voluntary or “third sector” in Western states. In accordance with neoliberal political and economic rationalities, many states are dismantling the kind of social services that characterized the historical welfare state (Barry et al 1996), from housing and education to counseling and health care, and instead outsourcing these services to private agencies and agencies in the voluntary sector (Hyatt 2001, Hyatt and Lyon-Calvo 2003, Ilcan and Basok 2004, Kingfisher 2002). While these neoliberal logics cast the social democratic state as a clumsy and oppressive vehicle for service provision that renders its citizens into passive recipients of aid, free market and civil spheres are celebrated as sites where citizens can unlearn “welfare dependency” in favor of patient “empowerment” and self-actualization through the active consumption of services (Milewa et al 1998).

This trend of harnessing the voluntary or “third” sector into providing formerly state-based services functions to cushion the jarring withdrawal of the social democratic safety net, but critical scholars also note profound effects in terms of individual subjectivity, especially in terms of citizenship expectations and obligations. Multiple studies show that voluntary sector agencies that are harnessed by the state to provide social services take it upon themselves to train clients and volunteers to be “responsible citizens” according to neoliberal principles of economic independence and productivity (Ilcan and Basok 2004, Ilcan 2009) as well as promoting a model of “consumerism” among service users (Maskovsky 2000).
In the Italian voluntary sector, Andrea Muehlebach finds that a model of responsible citizenship has emerged out of a push to promote a “culture of voluntarism” among citizens (2011:60), especially retired and unemployed people, in order to fill the gap left by the state as social service provision is reduced and privatized. These populations, who hold a marginal place in the workforce, are called upon to offer their non-remunerated labor to care for the needy, sick and elderly. The affective labor of volunteers, Muehlebach argues, is valued precisely in that it is not commercial; rather, the “unwaged labor regime” is represented as relying on what Robert Putnam (1993, 2000) calls social capital, namely the generation of trust, reciprocal generosity (61) and new, non-capitalist modes of rationality that unite individuals rather than alienating them (65). Drawing in large part on Catholic doctrines of gifting and benevolence, promoters celebrate this volunteer collective activity as something different and separate from market exchanges. For their part, unemployed and retired people mourning the loss of dignity and self-worth generated by work in the Fordist era gladly reach for the chance to avail themselves of the widespread and state-supported public recognition given to the voluntary sector in Italy (a recognition that is not granted to other forms of unpaid labor, such as housework) (73).  

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82 Though it does produce new forms of sociality and post-Fordist affect that are satisfying for its practitioners, Muehlebach finds that this regime of unwaged affective labor also enacts exclusion and justifies marginalization in that it is built on inequality between citizens and a morally veiled hyperexploitation (2011:75). As a foundation for new forms of citizenship, she argues, it leaves something to be desired, as the polity it hails is thus partial at best, and the promotion of this kind of work functions to obscure the profound disruptions and alienations wrought by post-industrial downsizing by re-casting unemployment and the volunteer affective labor it allows as an opportunity rather than a wrenching dislocation.
At first glance, the kind of non-remunerated labor carried out by CSOA participants bears a strong resemblance to the kind of voluntaristic activity that is celebrated as a vehicle for promoting “responsible” or “active” citizenship. Specifically, CSOA activity is also unpaid and voluntary, and is likewise positively valued by its practitioners for the way it works through and gives rise to non-capitalistic social relations. CSOA participants similarly give of their time and energy in forms of labor that are deliberately not quantified, and which are in fact made to resist quantification according to market-based rationalities. Individual income or profit, as I have described, is approached as an undesirable or potentially treacherous side-effect of CSOA activity that must be subjugated to collective decision making and used only for the collective good.

Upon closer examination, however, the fundamental differences overwhelm the superficial similarities. CSOA activity is the historical fruit of a particular collection of mass movements, from dissident anarchism with its focus on praxis to 1970s counter-cultural movements seeking to liberate the public sphere through unrestricted free expression such as that experimented with at Italian “free radio” stations. Participants at Italian social centers deliberately emphasize these historical origins and their associated values of anti-capitalism, anti-authoritarianism and moral transgression in distinguishing themselves from other forms of political engagement and civil sphere activity. Whereas Italian voluntary sector activity is highly institutionalized and moralized, strongly mediated by the state and shaped by Catholic doctrine (Muehlebach 2011:60), CSOA participants take an anti-moral stance that manifests itself, for instance, as a celebration
of the political aims and effects of unwaged CSOA labor rather than its moral superiority.

In the refusal of central participants to accrue authority or status as a result of their contribution, I also see a refusal of the Catholic-infused moral superiority that is a key currency of volunteer labor, especially when carried out as an act of charitable benevolence toward the needy or less-well-off. In contrast, CSOA participants stress the horizontal, solidarity-based character of their volunteer labor. Especially when pre-existing power differentials intrude on relations among participants, such as between the native Italians teachers and immigrant students of Italian as a second language courses, deliberate efforts are made to reduce power differences and empower individuals following the critical pedagogical approach of Paulo Freire. In fact, the XM24 Italian school is called “Italian School with Migrants” (Scuola Italiano con Migranti) to stress the horizontal aims of its participants and the “with” is often visually emphasized in banners and publicity materials.

In addition to the shared values and self-perception of activists, fundamental differences are observable in the autonomy (autonomia) of social centers, which is itself generated by everyday practices of self-management (autogestione). I have interpreted the multiple elements of social center participants’ everyday practice as the construction and enactment of an alternative political imaginary, but they also have a more pragmatic and immediate function: the pursuit of autonomy. And if we understand the alternative political imaginary they seek to enact as providing the practical foundations for an oppositional model of contemporary Italian citizenship, autonomy represents an essential component of this citizenship model.
The common aim or underlying logic of the everyday practices I have identified as constituting self-management is to make and implement decisions through the promotion of individual initiative and the diffusion of authority, responsibility (and the expertise necessary to hold it) among the collectivity of social center participants. What, then, is the relationship between self-management and autonomy? Self-management can be seen as the entirety of practices that make autonomy feasible – not possible or imaginable in an abstract, conceptual sense but actually workable in relation to the concrete conditions of a specific place and time. These practices range from the physical and logistical: e.g. maintaining the electrical system to avoid fires or accidents, scheduling concerts to end early enough that local residents are not motivated to call the police, acting to prevent disruptive behavior or violence; to the economic: e.g. working for free and/or pooling labor and earnings to keep the center and individual projects going without the need to pursue outside funding; to the discursive and rhetorical: e.g. participants defining and teaching themselves/each other and visitors about their aims and means of pursuing them, holding press conferences and issuing public statements, creating and circulating texts (flyers, videos, websites, etc.) theorizing about and/or representing what they do, and distinguishing themselves from commercial, institutional and political spaces both left and right.

As conditions change over time and between places, so do the specific practices of self-management; participants collectively bend before or push back against sea changes in the political, economic and cultural winds, sometimes defensively seeking to maintain a position or ameliorate the effects of a failure, other times leading the way, but
always in dynamic relation to prevailing conditions. At the current moment, as the line
between activist and non-governmental organizations blurs and many third sector groups
adopt and exchange professional, institutional-style practices just like or even more
actively than governmental agencies do, this quest for autonomy also involves rejecting
these third sector “best practices,” as described above, and avoiding legalization and
regular association status, as I describe in Chapter 6. Self-management is thus whatever
it takes at a given moment to ensure autonomy in the sense of effective freedom from
interference by the (local organs of the) state. While voluntary and third sector activity
can be and often is harnessed by the state to manage and serve its populations, self-
management in this sense actually substitutes for the state by establishing alternative
frameworks for the division of labor and the distribution of resources while providing for
all the necessary concrete and logistical components, such as infrastructural maintenance
and safety regulations, that keep things running smoothly so that outside authorities or
services are not required. As one XM24 participant put it, “we work hard so the cops
don’t come in here.”

The relationship between autonomy and self-management, furthermore, can be
seen as circular or mutually enabling. If self-management is all that which makes
autonomy workable, autonomy is the condition that makes it possible to experiment with
self-management: the state of being autonomous, being (as much as possible)
independent of increasingly diffused and invasive state-based (though often de-
centralized) regulations, controls, surveillance mechanisms and instruments of
reproducing and imposing dominant values and ways of being, is what allows
participants the freedom to try out the alternative social relations, forms of knowledge
diffusion and mechanisms of decision making that constitute their alternative political
imaginary and, I will argue, their particular model of citizenship: a model in which
belonging depends not on who you are or what you think but on what you do, and
participation itself is the basis for your right to speak up, be heard and have your say in
decisions that affect the collectivity.
CHAPTER 5
POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AND CULTURAL BELONGING IN THE SHADOW OF SECURITY

In this chapter, I take a temporary step back from social centers and their participants to trace the development of a specific discourse of security in north-central Italy that brings issues of urban co-living and uses of public space into the field of security. Following the dramatic events of September 11, 2001, the proliferation of anti-terrorism and pro-security initiatives throughout Western states has reached a level that is difficult to ignore. While many scholars address the development and logics of security policy itself, arguably the most broadly significant insight to emerge from investigations of securitization processes is the finding that securitization affects not only the putative object of security policy itself (migrants crossing political borders, terrorist organizations, organized crime networks) but also the larger society or setting where security measures are put into place, specifically by activating new sites and forms of control (Ceyhan and Tsoukala 2002, Murakami Wood and Webster 2009, Paone 2008, Epstein 2006). For instance, the deployment of biometric technologies such as fingerprint scanners at airport security checkpoints is found to generate not only diffused points of identity control but also larger effects including a strengthening of state power (Epstein 2006), while border control policies generate both new normative ideals of citizenship and new spaces of exception (Sparke 2005).

Ethnographic and critical discursive investigations of securitization processes similarly reveal how the local implementation of security measures generates larger
effects in terms of the sites and forms of modern power operating in people’s daily lives: from institutional networking and knowledge construction among policy actors in state agencies (Fosher 2009) to expanded surveillance and political effects for all citizens (Behdad 1998, Fassin 2005) and disparities in citizenship status that follow ethnic fault lines of exclusion (Feldman 2005). In other words, as contemporary democratic nation-states pursue security-oriented goals of surveilling, differentiating and regulating their populations in the name of protecting democracy and freedom, they often end up restricting, delimiting or rendering exclusive many of the same universal rights, civil liberties and forms of participation conventionally taken as defining features of the very model of Western democracy they ostensibly seek to protect.

The power effects of security processes have also attracted the attention of political and legal anthropologists, sparking investigations of emerging forms of power and political-legal subjectivity in the US government’s post-9-11 treatment of noncitizen detainees (Greenhouse 2005) and new security apparatuses such as Abu Ghraib prison (Caton 2006, Caton and Zacka 2010). Furthermore, anthropologists more generally have begun to theorize phenomena that previously might have been approached in terms of violence or crises of state legitimacy (Nagenast 1994), such as spectacular instances of vigilante justice at the local level (Burrell 2010, Goldstein 2003, 2004) and the efforts of illegal actors to displace the state’s function of ensuring urban safety (Penglase 2009), in
terms of security, citizenship rights and ideologically weighted notions of the rule of law.

This scholarship builds on recent work in political philosophy that seeks to make sense of the ideological and political developments generated by and generating the so-called war on terror and more generally the shifting contours of power and governance in the post 9/11 world order (Agamben 1998, 2004, Bauman 1999, Butler 2004, Žižek 2002, 2004; scholars also draw on Foucault’s lectures about security and territory, Foucault 2007). Growing from this theoretical foundation, recent anthropological scholarship on security processes thus seeks to unearth and come to grips with what we might call the “collateral effects” of emerging initiatives and objectives pursued in the name of safety, that is to say, the way that the myriad of security processes end up also affecting larger possibilities for thinking and acting. As security logics and vocabulary come to imbue the “background” of everyday debate and representation, they shape how we view fundamental elements of liberal democratic order such as the free expression of political dissent. Building on this insight, I explore how security discourses are re-shaping the field of political engagement in Italy, delimiting legitimate or credible political dissent as well as the boundaries of cultural belonging.

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83 This recent work can itself be seen as building on previous anthropological scholarship that explores the generation of legal concepts and security-oriented technologies of governmentality in the context of border control and more generally surrounding the generation of migrant “illegality” (see for example Behdad 1998, Coutin 1996, 1999b, 2000, Hagen 1994, Heyman 1995, 2002 Rouse 1992, 1995; see also Nicholas De Genova’s Annual Review article regarding migrant illegality specifically (2002). In this sense, contemporary investigations of security processes can be seen as a new way of theorizing and talking about processes that have long concerned anthropologists, from the differential regulation of racially marked populations to the larger political and cultural effects of new techniques of governmentality.
To help focus my investigative lens, I also draw on multi-disciplinary (mainly international studies and political science) scholarship on security, in which the process of bringing something into the sphere of security policy and knowledge is termed “securitization.” International studies scholar Jef Huysmans (2006) models an approach to securitization that attends to not only the generation and administration of fear and insecurity, but also the production of bureaucratic and technical knowledge about what constitutes security. Discursive efforts at securitization, Huysmans argues, themselves depend on technological and technocratic processes such as the development of data, diagrams and forms to fill out; these artifacts are used in security policy and practice, but their development often predates the securitization of the object they are applied to and commonly involves actors from both within and outside of a given nation state. For Huysmans, securitization is thus a technique for governing (perceived) danger, in which “technique” refers to practical skills, routines, and standardized modes of acting and disposing things according to a standard scheme or design (2006:9). I follow this approach in tracing the development of local security policy in Italy and ask, what does securitization generate? This brings me back to Italian CSOA in that urban security discourse has generated new vocabulary and conceptual frames for thinking and talking about urban co-living, uses of physical space and social conflict which have in turn shaped the terms and political weight of conflicts surrounding CSOA.

With this focus on technocratic processes, Huysmans departs from the concept of securitization as developed by the concepts’ original creators, known as the Copenhagen school of security studies, which mainly focuses on speech acts aimed at making something into an object of fear from which people must be defended and the factors that determine the success or failure of these discursive projects. Main work in this school includes Buzan 1991, Wæver et al 1993, Wæver 1995, and Buzan et al 1998.
The development of “urban security” in Italy

Security and Territory: defining urban security as an object of knowledge and policy intervention

In 1992, a group of academics from the fields of Criminology, Law and Political Science launched a new periodical in Bologna called Sicurezza e Territorio (Security and territory). It was aimed at disseminating the fruits of “the more mature experience of northern Europe” in Italy, especially criminology approaches and security policy from the United Kingdom and France dating from the late 1970s and 1980s. In the words of founding contributor Cosimo Braccesi, the magazine aimed to “help to equip the political-administrative personnel of Emilia-Romagna for that which was considered inevitable: the diffusion of a new, pressing social demand for security in Italian cities as well” (2005:25). With support and financing from the local chapter of the Partito Democratico della Sinistra, (Democratic Party of the Left, a reformulation that at the time included the former Partito Communista), the periodical outlined a new vision of regional-level security and crime reduction based on an Anglo-Saxon “Left Realist” approach to criminology, together with a set of strategies dubbed “integrated prevention.”

The “Left Realist” position, developed in the 1980s in Britain, comes out of “critical criminology” and through oppositional relationship to two dominant approaches of the time: on one side, a Marxist-inspired “Left Idealist” approach to crime, which was criticized for idealizing rule-breakers as rebels against bourgeoisie hegemony while failing to address the practical concerns of everyday violence and victimization; and, on
the other side, mainstream institutionalized criminology, which was accused of divorcing
crime from the larger historical, social, political and economic context and the
inequalities generated by capitalism. In contrast, Left Realism argues that crime must be
approached first of all by placing it in historical context and understanding human action
as generated by both structural and symbolic forces (see for example Lea and Young
people are disproportionately affected by personal crime, crime prevention should be
made a central issue of the political Left, rather than ceding it to the Right; furthermore,
the mechanisms of crime reduction and prevention should be developed through a
democratic control of the authorities by the communities affected (Carlen 1992: 56,

In the very first issue of Sicurezza e Territorio (1992), Massimo Pavarini,
professor of Law at the University of Bologna, presents an article entitled “Living in a
safe city: ideas for a project of integrated prevention in an urban neighborhood” that
introduces Italian readers to what, Pavarini argues, has already become prevalent in
international circles: an “integrated prevention” approach to urban security.85 “Integrated

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85 The title in Italian is “Vivere una Città Sicura: idée per un progetto di prevenzione integrato in un
quartiere cittadino”. Pavarini references two specific international conferences on urban security from
which he draws inspiration: The “First European and North American Conference on Urban Safety and
Crime Prevention” in Montreal, Canada in 1989, organized by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities
(FCM), The United States Conference of Mayors, and the European Forum for Urban Safety (an
organization created following 1986 and 1987 meetings in Strasbourg and Barcelona on local policies to
reduce Urban Insecurity, organized by the Council of Europe); and the “Second International Conference
on Urban Safety, Drugs and Crime Prevention” held in Paris in 1991. According to the Paris meeting’s
“Final Declaration,” the conference was attended by “more than 1,600 mayors, councilors, police
executives, social development leaders and government representatives from 65 countries” with delegations
representing Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia and Africa (European Forum for Urban Safety et
al 1991:1).
prevention” involves not simply improving penal law but rather offering an improvement on repressive or penal-oriented responses to crime and insecurity altogether by “framing social control as a political, economic and social issue rather than a solely penal one” (Pavarini 1992: 11). The preventive measures comprising this approach are aimed at changing material situational circumstances, on one hand, and widespread cultural norms on the other; prevention is thus pursued through either situational/circumstantial interventions (targeting specific physical or social situations to make it more difficult to commit certain crimes or easier for potential victims to defend themselves) or larger social development policies (aimed at changing the underlying causes contributing to criminalization and victimization and promoting social norms leading to behavior consistent with urban security) (12).

Referring to the conclusions of the Second International Conference on Urban Safety, Drugs and Crime Prevention held in Paris in 1991, Pavarini argues that such prevention strategies are best developed and implemented at the local level, because that is the only way to ensure the “direct participation of the community” in developing policy objectives; a neighborhood or segment of a neighborhood is thus the most appropriate geographic-social unit or scale for integrated prevention (ibid).\(^86\) He notes furthermore that, in using the Italian term *communità*, he intends it in the sense of the English word

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\(^{86}\) This emphasis on direct community participation may reflect the political orientation of the ‘Left Realist’ approach to crime prevention more than that of the “Second International Conference on Urban Safety, Drugs and Crime Prevention” per se, as the text of the conference’s Final Declaration outlines a rather less central and more passive role for the community: it states that “the public must be encouraged by local, regional, and national governments, international agencies and non-governmental groups to participate in comprehensive crime prevention and to understand the importance to urban development of implementing effective ways of making communities safer from crime” (1991:2).
community, which in Italian could also be captured with the word *territorio* (territory). The term thus indicates not only a specific “socio-geographic entity” but also and especially “the entirety of formal and informal social groups, representative networks of individuals, organizations, agencies, et cetera united by common concerns” (ibid). These common concerns, we can deduce, are “territorial” in the sense that they arise from the experience of living together in a specific geographic area such as a neighborhood.

This spatially defined community is not the only actor in implementing integrated prevention; state agencies are also key. However, the “integrated prevention” approach suggests a new way of “putting into play the action of the Social State, the decisive role of its services, and the capacities of the territorial government in its multiple autonomous and decentralized articulations” (Pavarini 1992:11). Rather than citizens looking to the central state to protect them through repressive or punitive mechanisms, civil society actors such as voluntary organizations and neighborhood citizen’s committees should take the lead in combating small-scale criminality and manifestations of social disorder at the local level. As the editorial board of the periodical argue, “thematizing prevention as a space of political and social action in order to guarantee more satisfying levels of security means correctly placing, at the center of attention, those forms and procedures most suited to ensuring that civil society appropriates the functions of governing social conflicts in the social [sphere]” (1992: 6). Here we see the common ground between Left Realist and “preventive” approaches, in that they begin from the premise that state-based repressive mechanisms are neither sufficient nor ideal for addressing small-scale
criminality and socially “disorderly” behavior, and that alternative solutions must emerge from and focus on specific local contexts in defining both problems and solutions.

Situating themselves as the expert spokespeople of this new approach to urban security (an approach which, they remind us, is already widespread in international circles), multiple contributing authors share in indicting the central government’s failure to adequately address the ‘security needs’ of Italian city residents. According to the editors\textsuperscript{87}, even though crime levels have not actually increased in the way sensationalistic media reports might suggest, people’s level of fear is increasing. Besides misinformation, however, this fear has a valid basis in “the feeling people have that they are alone in facing micro-criminality,” that there are no authorities or institutions capable of defending citizens from small-scale, diffused phenomena of illegality (1992:9).

Educational and recreational institutions, the editors lament, are not providing civil education or social discipline suited to maintaining harmonious urban co-living; rather, it is left to individual citizens or families to respond. People have been encouraged to look to the state to maintain public order, but the state is not (or no longer) capable of effectively meeting contemporary needs. “Led to trust in the capacity of the institutions to provide, today people feel deceived, but they are not capable of responding collectively to their own security needs, either”\textsuperscript{(ibid)}.

This indictment of central governmental failure and the associated focus on civil society clarifies what an integrated prevention approach involves: collective, de-centralized interventions developed and implemented through cooperation between

\textsuperscript{87} This argument is made in the first article of the first issue, a report on a forum discussion held in Bologna in 1992, organized by the magazine’s founders and involving various state and civil sphere actors.
individual citizens, collective civil society entities (voluntary organizations, citizens committees, etc.), and local authorities that are supported by central government but empowered to act autonomously at the local level. In addition to a new field of action and network of actors, the periodical’s contributors therefore also envision a new relationship between local and national authorities in which the central state ceded significant decision-making power to local administrators and politicians (e.g. the president, council and policy-makers of the Region of Emilia-Romagna, mayors and city councils of individual cities in the region). Up to that point, security in Italy had been the exclusive purview of penal-legal professionals under the authority of central state institutions (Pavarini 2006:13). In order to establish an agenda for local urban security policy, it was thus necessary to wrest security (as an object of governance) away from its conventional domination by penal/legal professionals and institutions. By re-defining security as an object that is, a) best addressed by local institutions at the local level, and b) best addressed by extra-penal mechanisms, this “local urban security” approach set up a new field of action and a new knowledge-object to which new actors (internationally networked academics, local level policy makers and politicians) could and must contribute, and in relation to which they could claim technical expertise.

Though it seeks to introduce new technical vocabulary and conceptualizations of urban security, the imagined audience of this periodical is not solely administrative or technical; as the editorial board members explain in their introduction, they seek “to offer a space of debate and knowledge development with all the authorities and public and private agencies working at the regional level, involved in problems of citizens’ security: in first place, the police and judiciary authorities, but also the social services and volunteer organizations” (6). The periodical thus addresses as an audience the very hybrid collection of state and civil sphere actors that should be the foundation for developing collaborative or “integrated” policies.
This move to displace the central state’s centrality in relation to security was perhaps made easier by the fact that Italian national governments were displaying little interest in issues of security in the 1990s. In one of his many publications about urban security in Italy, Pavarini (2006) describes how, in contrast to other European counties, the center-left national government in this period was “certainly distracted, if not actually deaf” to security concerns in this period (13). The next administration, a center-Right coalition, thwarted all reasonable expectations by also failing to make urban security a distinguishing feature of its political platform (14). The central government carried on with an “increasingly anachronistic” (ibid) repressive approach to large-scale criminality such as the drug trade and counterfeiting, while the multiple national police forces were tasked with generic “public order” maintenance. More diffused and everyday instances of small-scale criminality, Pavarini argues, effectively slipped through the cracks.

This disinterest or distraction on the part of the national government is perhaps comprehensible if we recall that tangentopoli, the corruption scandal that ended up implicating the majority of the leading political parties and figures of the period, broke out in February 1992, just months before the launching of Sicurezza e Territorio in March/April 1992. It was a moment of political and institutional upheaval, a fracturing of established power-sharing arrangements that gave rise to new potential sites of authority construction. Stepping into the breach, the professional academics of Sicurezza e Territorio thus began to develop a policy approach at the local level in Emilia-Romagna that took its lead from models already established in other European states rather than implementing directives from the Italian state.
Security pioneers in Emilia-Romagna

As Braccesi explains, one of the main objectives of *Sicurezza e Territorio* was to help educate regional policy and lawmakers in anticipation of the “new, pressing social demand for security” that was already prevalent in other European contexts and was sure to arrive in Italian cities at any minute (Braccesi and Selmini 2005:25). Although the central government in the early 1990s was lagging behind, he suggests that local policy makers could already begin looking to extra-domestic models in preparation for this inevitable occurrence. Curiously, however, by raising the issue of urban security in this period, the authors of *Sicurezza e Territorio* were not only one step ahead of the Italian state, they were actually one step ahead of measurable increases in the Italian public’s subjective perceptions of insecurity and a resultant demand for security services, as well.

At the national level, crime rates in this period were steady or decreasing, depending on the crime.  

At any rate, in Italy organized crime plays a major role in violent offenses such as murder, and since organized crime activity disproportionately impacts southern Italy and the islands, a disproportionately low amount of this national crime rate directly affects central and northern Italy. In other words, people in regions such as Emilia-Romagna had relatively little to worry about. In fact, as the editorial introduction to *Sicurezza e Territorio* itself suggests, fears of victimization or insecurity “are often exaggerated, if not actually irrational, for those living in a city like Bologna or

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89 A Ministry of the Interior report from 2006 reports that the murder rate (especially linked to organized crime) reached a peak in 1992 and then began to fall off (Rapporto sulla criminalità in Italia 2006:3). The rate of publically visible crimes associated with decorum and the use of public spaces such as favoring/exploiting prostitution had risen somewhat since 1989, but was steady from 1991-1997, and the rates of those personal, predatory crimes that often cause fear among the populace such as home breaks ins, muggings and bag snatching, while rising since the 1970s, had begun to fall off again after 1991 (5-12).
a territory such as Emilia” (1992:5). Of course, researchers and public policy makers alike agree that people may develop a sense of insecurity regardless of actual crime rates and express a demand for security based on these subjective perceptions. The demand for security is thus linked less to objective rates of crime or risk and more to a subjective, perceived ‘sense’ of insecurity diffused through the public or through certain sectors of the public.

However, in the early 1990s the Italian public had not expressed an increased concern with or demand for security in the sense of crime reduction and social control. According to privately conducted surveys, fears connected to security tapered off following the “years of lead” period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and did not begin to increase substantially until 1998. Likewise, it was not until the late 1990s that a significant proportion of citizens identified criminality and/or immigration as a source of criminality as top priorities for the government to address (Diamanti and Bordignon 2001:120-121). Coming at the question of public concern from another angle, sociologist Marcello Maneri charts the frequency and way that “security” was used in the titles of major national newspapers over the course of the 1990s. Maneri likewise finds that the term security appeared only sporadically in the early 1990s and did not began to

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90 It does not appear that the Italian National Institute of Statistics (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica, ISTAT) was collecting information about citizen’s subjective perceptions of insecurity in this period; instead, the data available is from a private public opinion surveying company, the “Istituto per gli studi sulla pubblica opinione (ISPO) which, according to the company website, “is an institute for social, economic, and public opinion research directed by Professor Renato Mannheimer and headquartered in Milan. It was established in the early 1980s by a group of university professors from various Italian universities. The institute carries out high quality, scientifically rigorous and effective research for companies, the media, institutions, the political world, associations, the third sector and non-profit entities” (Homepage. http://www.ispo.it/; accessed August 2011).
dominate newspaper headlines until the late 1990s (2001:7-8). Not only was security not a main topic of debate in the early 1990s, when the term did appear it carried a different semantic valence: Maneri finds that even when the term “insecurity” was used prior to 1997, it was used to indicate failures of structural integrity in roads, buildings or equipment or the ineffectiveness of certain institutions; it was not until the late 1990s that the term began to be associated with the safety of people or possessions (2001:8-9).

Unlike Italy’s anti-terrorism legislation of the 1970s, which can be seen as a direct response by the state to widespread fear and publically voiced concerns from the electorate following dramatic and widespread violence, *Sicurezza e Territorio*’s policy line appears to anticipate not only a rise in crime rates but also any measurable sense of insecurity among Italian citizens. If it was not triggered by a quantifiable increase in the Italian public’s demand for security, then, it can perhaps best be understood as a technocratic project that builds on the rise of security policy in other European states through sharing of professional expertise and technologies. As political sociologist and critical security scholar Didier Bigo notes, the development of “security” as an object of policy and administration offers new opportunities for professional growth, such as new applications for military expertise and technology and new professional roles for law-enforcement actors (2002:63-65 and 74-76). In this case, local-level security discourse used existing forms of expertise (such as academic criminology and sociology approaches) and also generated new arenas of authority construction and professional

91 We can recall that the *Lega Nord* party, a main player in bringing discourses of urban insecurity and illegal migration as a source of social and physical ‘insecurity’ to national attention through its political campaigns, did not present a list for the national general elections until 1992 and so was just beginning to appear on the national political radar at this time.
development for academics as well as regional and municipal administrative and political figures, who were called on to direct the policy initiatives it produced.92

**Tailoring “integrated prevention” to the local context: the Città Sicure policy project**

In 1994, after only two years of publication, the process of knowledge production and problem identification initiated in *Sicurezza e Territorio* gave rise to an experimental new policy project called Città Sicure (Safe Cities). This project was initiated by the sitting president of Emilia-Romagna, Pier Luigi Bersani, under the authority of the regional government. With a scientific advisory board featuring the same academics who had launched *Sicurezza e Territorio* two years earlier (Braccesi 2005: 25 note 2), Città Sicure was designed to “assert regional and municipal responsibility for governing security, and consequently to offer local governments the knowledge tools to assume this responsibility (Pavarini 1995:9) or, in other words, to continue the technocratic project of defining urban security as an object to be addressed by local policy.”93

Città Sicure (Safe Cities) was “experimental” in part because it was the first policy initiative in Italy to define and address security at the local level. Reading *Sicurezza e Territorio* and the first Città Sicure annual reports, however, it is not yet clear

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92 The claims of expertise extended by the professional academics involved in *Sicurezza e Territorio* were apparently confirmed throughout this process: in their many subsequent publications on local urban security, they repeatedly praise the remarkable and innovative level of coherence between social scientific (specifically, socio-criminological) knowledge production/research and political-administrative choices (Braccesi and Selmini 2005:26, Pavarini 2006: 12) that characterized Emilia-Romagna’s security policy in the 1990s.

93 In the words of an informational pamphlet published by the Region, the first phase (1994-1999) was focused on “research, the definition of a common vocabulary, accompanying local administrations in the development of initial experimentations, the creation of annual reports on the problems of security in Emilia-Romagna, and the promotion of the Italian Forum on Urban Security” (Città Sicure 2006: 5).
what exactly “security” as a local policy object looks like or, in other words, what specific phenomena an integrated prevention approach to Italian urban security should address. The purpose of the periodical and subsequent pilot phase of the policy project was precisely to define “local urban security” in relation to the specific context of Emilia-Romagna. In his introduction to the first Città Sicure annual report (1995), Pavarini acknowledges that security is a slippery object of study and administration due to its dual character, combining both objective and subjective elements. On one hand “insecurity” involves quantifiable risks of victimization and threats to personal safety, and on the other hand it involves the concerns that people develop on the basis of subjective perceptions and experiences, often independent of quantifiable risks or on the basis of misinformation. Intellectuals, suggests Pavarini, have traditionally supposed themselves superior to the (possibly ‘irrational’) fears of others, but the scientific advisory board of Città Sicure tasked itself with putting aside this conventional position of condescension and “seriously taking people’s fears into consideration” (Pavarini 1995:8). The Città Sicure project thus set out to collect and analyze data about regional crime patterns (the rates of various categories of crime and who is most targeted) as well as what people living in Emilia-Romagna were concerned about. Researchers developed a questionnaire with specific but primarily open-ended questions designed to measure respondents’ sense of security and insecurity and identify what they found most alarming (ibid:47-48).94

94 The questionnaire was developed as follows: after establishing a sample of 1,500 respondents (residents of the region, 18 y.o. or over, proportionate to the size of each city), researchers conducted exploratory interviews in which 50 respondents were asked to “speak freely about issues related to security” (Mosconi 1995:47); the questionnaire was written on the basis of these unstructured interviews and in relation to other similar surveys conducted abroad.
This research found that in 1994-1995 Emilia-Romagna residents were fairly concerned about criminality as an abstract issue (28% listed it among their top three concerns and 14% in first place), but it was overshadowed by concerns about a perceived “crisis/deterioration of the institutions” (38% first place, 19% top three) and unemployment among young people (37% first place, 26% top three). To better identify the specific behaviors and phenomena people associated with criminality, the report also analyzes the findings of several other surveys conducted in Bologna and Modena in the early 1990s. Interviewees identify two areas of “troubling” phenomena: 1) things that had always happened and continued to happen, such as bag snatchings or apartment and vehicular breaks-ins, which they attributed to nomadi (Rom people) or drug addicts; and new or “emergent” phenomena including drug addiction (manifested as discarded syringes and petty theft used to finance users’ drug habits), “incivility,” excessive noise late at night, vandalism, and public spaces such as parks and piazzas rendered unusable due their being “invaded by marginality” (Aymone 1995:108-109). Unfortunately the author does not clarify what is meant by “invasion by marginality,” but the context suggests that “marginality” involves actors and/or behaviors considered deviant or socially inappropriate for these common spaces.

Examining the data collection and analysis associated with Città Sicure, we can see that the conceptualization of security developed through this policy project sought to take into account both objective measures of security such as crime rates as well as subjective measures of “insecurity” and what specifically citizens’ perceived as threatening. The resulting definition of “security” as a knowledge-object and policy goal
is markedly diffuse and prosaic, incorporating not only the absence or reduction of crime (petty or otherwise) but also many of the conflictual social interactions and controversial uses of public space that comprise daily urban life. As an object to be administrated or addressed through policy, it suggests a field of action that is quite far-reaching and yet at the same time highly local, made up of specific physical or situational sites of intervention (parks, piazzas) and behaviors to be addressed (petty theft, drug use, vandalism, rudeness, being too loud at night). In this definition, “insecurity” is caused not solely or even primarily by instances of illegal behavior per se. In fact, most of the phenomena identified as inspiring “insecurity” are not technically against the law. Rather, “insecurity” is caused by anything that makes people uncomfortable or deviates from what is socially constructed in a certain time and place as appropriate or “civil” behavior.

In addition to new associations for the term “security” itself, this broader, more everyday conception of urban security also gave new significance to the term degrado urbano (urban blight or deterioration). In his analysis of newspaper articles about security in the 1990s, Maneri finds that, alongside the increased use and meaning shift of the term “security” (from infrastructural integrity to the safety of people and possessions), the term degrado urbano also grew in frequency and underwent a semantic shift during the 1990s. While previously used to refer exclusively to the abandonment of buildings, public spaces and artistic assets, starting around 1997 degrado urbano underwent a notable shift to refer to the “deterioration of the urban landscape caused by the presence of immigrants, homeless people, drug addicts and petty criminals, with the discomfort
and insecurity that this presence entails” (Maneri 2001:9). Though it retains its association with physical structures and their maintenance, “urban blight” thus also comes to incorporate a social component: an ambiguously broad and context-specific selection of people and/or behaviors that are seen to violate whatever norms dominate in a specific time and place, and through this violation, to inspire feelings of insecurity in the (presumably non-deviant) concerned citizens addressed by urban security policy initiatives.

From its beginning as an innovative experimental initiative introducing international and European approaches to the Italian context, Città Sicure provided a model for urban security policy in cities and regions throughout Italy over the course of the 1990s and early 2000s. The Emilia-Romagna regional government formally adopted this new approach through legislation establishing an “integrated system of security” in regional cities through coordination between city, regional and provincial authorities (Law no. 3 of 1999). This was followed by more legislation in 2003 (Law no. 24) that further re-organized regional governing structures in relation to security and gave local police forces a central role in implementing ‘prevention policies’. The region also played

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95 Marzio Barbagli’s edited volume Egregio signor sindaco (Dear Mister Mayor) (1999) is another source that illustrates this shift, in that it reprints and briefly analyzes letters sent to the mayor of Bologna by citizens concerned about issues that, in retrospect, are grouped under the umbrella of urban security: the cleanliness and repair of physical structures, episodes of micro-criminality, and the disturbing presence of deviant social figures in public places. In these letters we see the term degrado increasingly linked to specific figures and their uses of public space over the mid and late 1990s, at first almost exclusively attributed to Rom people but as the decade wears on, increasingly targeting extra-EU immigrants as well as young people.

96 As part of this consolidation, the experimental “Servizio Promozione e sviluppo delle politiche per la sicurezza e della polizia locale” (Promotion and Development of security policies and local police service) created in 1994 was confirmed as an official office within the regional administration employing “experts in urban security, prevention and local police” (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2010: 16 anni di politiche) and directed by Cosimo Braccesi himself; at some point the position of director passed to another original Sicurezza e Territorio contributor, Rossella Selmini.
a key role in defining legislation passed in 2003 to establish an “integrated security system” at the national level, supported by all three of the entities representing Italian localities at the national level (Giovannetti 2009:137).\textsuperscript{97} More than 300 local preventive or security-related initiatives were financed under the auspices of the Città Sicure project, along with 13 pilot projects testing new policy strategies (Città Sicure 2006:5). By 2009, the approach to urban security developed through Città Sicure (and its associated vocabulary and conceptualizations) had become prevalent enough to shape national discourse on security: for example, the introduction (Chiodini and Milano 2009:8) to a 2009 report by the Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani (National Association of Italian Municipalities, or ANCI) summarizing the many “urban security” ordinances issued by Italian mayors over the course of the 2000s asserts that:

The ordinances, and the debate that has accompanied them, attest to the fact that local administrations are searching for a more ample space of intervention. An intervention capable of responding to a growing and widespread unease about daily life, respect for the rules of civil co-living, the decency of public spaces, and the recognizeability and peacefulness of behaviors in relating with others.\textsuperscript{98}

\textsuperscript{97} These entities include the Conferenza dei Presidenti di Regione e di Provincia autonoma (Presidents of Regions and Autonomous Provinces Conference), the Unione delle Province d'Italia (Union of Italian Provinces), and the Associazione dei Comuni Italiani (Association of Italian Municipalities). The law in question was titled “Disposizioni per il coordinamento in materia di sicurezza pubblica e polizia amministrativa locale, e per la realizzazione di politiche integrate per la sicurezza” (Regulations for coordination in relation to the subject of public security and local police administration and for the creation of integrated security policies) (Giovannetti 2009: 137).

\textsuperscript{98} The original Italian reads: “Le ordinanze, e il dibattito che le ha accompagnate, attestano la ricerca, da parte delle amministrazioni locali, di un più ampio spazio di intervento. Un intervento in grado di rispondere ad una crescente e diffusa inquietudine riguardante la vita quotidiana, il rispetto delle regole di civile convivenza, il decoro degli spazi pubblici, la riconoscibilità e la serenità dei comportamenti nelle relazioni con gli altri.”

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By 2009 it had therefore become commonplace to define urban security as including not only crime but also violations of “the rules of civil co-living” or deteriorations in “the decency of public spaces.”

Mapping urban insecurity in Emilia-Romagna: RILFEDEUR

To make out the concrete referents of slippery terms such as “decency,” “civility” and “blight” I explore the implementation of this policy in a specific place and time: through one of the experimental programs implemented in Emilia-Romagna, called “Rilevamento dei fenomeni di degrado urbano” (Survey of urban blight phenomena, or RILFEDEUR). Launched July 1, 2001 as a pilot project in Bologna, RILFEDEUR is essentially a data collection system designed to enroll local residents in the project of identifying instances of small-scale criminality and urban blight. The program came out of an agreement between Emilia-Romagna and the Ministry of the Interior in 2001.99 It established new channels of communication for receiving reports of urban blight from concerned citizens (a dedicated toll free phone line, an email account to receive electronic messages, and an interactive online form to fill out) alongside new technological tools for local police (personal digital assistants [PDA], essentially a hand-held or “palmtop” personal computer) to record instances they observe. In addition, RILFEDEUR includes a central information processing “laboratory” set up under the authority of the Bologna

99 Coming out of the devolution of decision-making power that gave regions more autonomy from the central state in relation to urban security issues, RILFEDEUR was coordinated from the beginning by the regional “Promotion and Development of security policies and local police” office (Servizio Promozione e sviluppo delle politiche per la sicurezza e della polizia locale); it initially involved the Municipal Police of the cities of Bologna, Modena, Reggio-Emilia, Forlì and Rimini. Supported by the central government Ministry of Innovation and Technologies (Ministro per l’Innovazione e le Tecnologie), the project was funded under the heading of “security” as part of the region’s information technologies plan accepted by the Emilia-Romagna Regional Council in 2002 (decision number 828 of May 27, 2002).
Prefect (the local representative of the state’s Ministry of the Interior) to collect and process incoming reports. After being processed and verified first-hand by city police officers, incoming reports are then collated, disseminated to the relevant professional body (local police, health inspectors, trash collectors, etc.) to be addressed, and plotted on a digital map of the region.

According to policy documents, the objective of RILFEDEUR is to “enlarge and improve the activities of Municipal Police forces in identifying phenomena of “incivility” and “urban blight” as well as facilitating a better dialogue on these issues between police and citizens/city residents” (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2003:3, italics and quotation marks in the original). This dialogue between citizens and police is important, policymakers note, given that “numerous research studies have in fact demonstrated that, in our regional territory as well, perceptions of insecurity appear more highly correlated with a presence of these phenomena that with the actual experience of falling victim to a crime” (Regione Emilia-Romagna n.d.B:2). To improve residents’ sense of security, then, RILFEDEUR responds to what policymakers understand as an unfilled demand on the part of the public for the state or its local representatives to be more present and visible in managing or addressing these prosaic, widespread instances of “blight.” In fact, the RILFEDEUR project design includes a feature through which all citizens who make reports are sent responses acknowledging receipt of the report and promising prompt action by the appropriate authorities.

100 The Italian term cittadino/a, derived from the Latin civis meaning inhabitant of a city or city-state, retains the original association with the city as site of belonging and participation in that as a noun it refers to both residents of a given city and citizens of a state while as an adjective it means “related to the city” as in “iniziativa cittadina” meaning initiatives originating in, at the scale of or focused on the city.
Defining and classifying “incivility” and “urban blight”

The development and pilot phase of RILFEDEUR offers a particularly revealing window onto the specific phenomena that have been considered “urban blight” in Emilia-Romagna and the city of Bologna beginning from the early 2000s. First of all, it is important to note that “incivility” and “urban blight” were brought into security discourse specifically to indicate phenomena that do not carry penal sanctions according to the existing legal codes of the time. As an early description of RILFEDEUR specifies, “incivility and urban blight” are understood “to indicate those behaviors or phenomena that produce a demand for security on the part of city residents even though they do not fall within the scope of the penal system” (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2003:3). Seeing as they were by definition outside of the penal system, however, there was no pre-existing system of categories through which to organize information collected about them. While illegal behaviors were already defined and standardized through existing systems of data collection (e.g. crime rates collected by local police authorities), these extra-penal phenomena were subjective and locally defined. Furthermore, in the RILFEDEUR system, reports are processed by multiple different types of personnel: operators in call centers, data processors taking reports from the internet, and local police officers themselves. In order to process reports into data that could be shared among multiple agencies, it was necessary to transform citizens’ subjective concerns into a standardized and thus quantifiable and comparable form of data. The reporting process needed to be fast and yet “repeatable over time and between different operators” without leaving any space for “ambiguity of interpretation” (Regione Emilia-Romagna n.d. B:4).
To this end, RILFEDEUR policy makers developed a scheme for classifying “incivility and urban blight” phenomena that includes six overall categories: animal-related, vehicle-related, road condition/traffic related, episode of micro-criminality, physical-environmental blight, and social blight (degrado) (Regione Emilia-Romagna n.d. B: 9). The scheme furthermore specifies two “faces” for every instance of blight: the identity of the subject/object (personal, animal or thing), and the character of the event(s) to which he/she/it is subject or of which he/she/it is the author. Every overall category thus includes multiple possible subject/objects and events; the resulting scheme allows operators to select one or more vertical (subject/object) axes and one or more horizontal (event) axes for a single report, with the intersection(s) between them identifying the specific singular or multiple elements of a given instance of urban blight. For example, within the category of micro-criminality, a bicycle (object) may be stolen (event), while a person (subject) may be robbed, pick-pocketed, purse-snatched, mugged, and/or conned (Regione Emilia-Romagna n.d. B: 10, Table 4). One instance can also include multiple aspects, for instance homeless people camped out in an abandoned parking lot could be reported as “people without a fixed address,” “present” on or “occupying” “private property,” creating “conflictual relations” with “residents,” and/or contributing to the “improper disposal” of “refuse” as the case may be.

101 According to multiple documents detailing the development of the project, policy makers began by asking local police officers what phenomena they considered relevant, which generated a list of 45 phenomena (Regione Emilia-Romagna n.d. B:3). This list was further expanded and refined through focus groups and repeated consultations with 350 local police personnel representing the multiple cities involved (Nobili 2007:9). As each local police authority already had its own working definitions and classificatory schemes for many of the phenomena now grouped under the concepts “incivility” and “urban blight,” policy makers worked to integrate and harmonize these multiple local schemes by repeatedly revising the categories in consultation with participating agencies (Regione Emilia-Romagna n.d. B:4-7).
While public discourse about urban security represents degrado as a self-evident object of common concern, RILFEDEUR categories reveal some of the specific cultural-political assumptions and logics embodied in such policy instruments as they seek to define and address a complex and dynamic set of problems through specific mechanisms and interventions (Shore and Wright 1997). Particularly interesting is the social dimension of phenomena that contribute to “insecurity,” the class of phenomena referred to as “social blight” (degrado sociale). For the horizontal “event” axis of “social blight,” there are 13 possibilities, including neglect of, threats to, or threat represented by but also presence, occupation, nighttime noise, wandering, overpopulation and conflictual relations (Regione Emilia-Romagna n.d. B: 12, Table 6). For the vertical or “subject/object” axis there are 21 possibilities. These are mainly classes of people, such as adults, youth, immigrants, scam artists, homeless people, drug dealers, drug addicts, unauthorized sellers, sexual exhibitionists, “apparently unstable subjects,” “nomads” and “pu[

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102 The entire list is as follows: neglect, in danger, pollution, invasive, non respect (of), occupation, dangerous, presence, conflictual relations, nighttime noise, overpopulation, wandering, violation of road rules (Incuria, In pericolo, Inquinamento, Invidenti, Non rispetto, Occupazione, Pericoloso, Presenze, Relazioni Conflittuali, Schiamazzi notturni, Sovraffollamento, Vaganti, Violazione Codice Stradale).

103 The term nomadi literally means nomads, but can be understood in this context to refer to people of Rom descent who may or may not have a fixed residence. I have translated the Italian term punkabestia somewhat literally as “punk with dog,” but the closest American English term would probably be “crusty punk,” referring to people associated with the anarchist-linked political punk underground that originated in the 1980s, who express their counter-cultural allegiances through self-presentation (unkempt or dreadlocked hair, dirty/ripped/patched clothing in dark colors, patches and pins) and lifestyle choices (traveling, squatting, eschewing regular employment). In Italian cities, crusty punks are usually accompanied by one or more dogs, thus earning them the name “punk with beast.” The entire list in alphabetical order is as follows: other, conflict young people/adults, conflict young people/young people, conflict immigrants/immigrants, conflict immigrants/non-immigrants, scam artists on the street, premises business hours limit, (sexual) maniac/exhibitionists, panhandlers, nomads, unauthorized parkers, prostitution, punks with beasts, subjects lacking fixed address, apparently unstable subjects, drug...
vertical axis also includes combinations of people who might come into conflict: young person/adult, young person/young person, immigrant/non-immigrant and immigrant/immigrant. Combining these axes of classification, RILFEDEUR allows police officers or concerned citizens to report as an instance of “social blight” the presence of certain people (homeless people, panhandlers, immigrants, youth) in places where they are judged to not belong, or manifestations of “incivility” such as antagonistic relations between young people and adults.

Although the “integrated prevention” approach as presented in Sicurezza e Territorio ostensibly aims to protect the most marginalized segments of society from their disproportionate victimization by small-scale criminality and associated phenomena, the classificatory logics of RILFEDEUR do not reflect this concern with socio-economic vulnerability. Indeed, the very populations who are marginalized in the Italian context (for e.g. migrants, homeless people and unemployed youth) are here presented as key factors of urban insecurity and sources of “incivility” that must be addressed by the police.104 The “integrated prevention” approach also clearly implies that any improvement to urban security must also come in part from improvements in social justice through education and social services (by reducing socio-economic inequalities,
integrating marginalized subjects or intervening in cultural logics of exclusion, for instance), but this kind of preventive approach is nowhere visible in RILFEDEUR’s classificatory logics. Following the community-centered logic of “integrated prevention,” RILFEDEUR does give a central role to the “end user” (concerned citizens and police officers) in developing its categories. However, by taking the pre-existing subjective “insecurities” of concerned citizens as its point of departure from which to create official definitions of blight, it functions to enshrine and legitimize specific class, gender and race-specific norms and exclusionary logics as official public policy. Furthermore, given that social conflict is itself defined as an aspect of urban blight, any active or public contestation of these norms and logics is potentially de-legitimized through its association with “incivility” and urban decay.

**Shifting subjects of surveillance and control**

Several distinct populations emerge from the definitional and classificatory logics constructed through the RILFEDEUR system. The first, implied rather than explicitly defined, is the unmarked population of individuals who would presumably make these reports. Often referred to as *residenti* (residents), these are the concerned citizens whose sense of belonging to a locally rooted community inspires them to feel concerned about “urban blight” in their neighborhood and thus the people whose “sense of insecurity” is investigated and quantified through the multiple data collection processes I have described. They are the local “community” whose active participation should ideally form the foundation of an “integrated prevention” approach to urban security and, as
such, the assumed users of the RILFEDEUR system. For Italian census and administrative purposes, *residente* (resident) designates individuals who at the time of registration were authorized by the central state authorities to reside in Italy and who register their presence with the local (municipal, town) office of vital statistics; the term “resident” can thus refer to documented immigrants as well as native Italians (for instance, I have been a resident of Bologna since 2009). However, in some RILFEDEUR policy texts there is a semantic slippage whereby the term *autoctoni* (autochthonous people, natives) is used in place of or as a synonym for “residents” (see for example Nobili 2004, City of Sassuolo 2008), suggesting a more ethnically exclusive definition of the term “resident” as equivalent to native Italian, unambiguously distinct from the category of “immigrant.”

In contrast to the unmarked population of RILFEDEUR users, multiple “deviant” figures are identified as potential factors of urban blight. Some of these actors, such as scam artists, sexual exhibitionists and unauthorized sellers, are already defined as illegal through existing commercial or penal codes. Others, such as panhandlers, drug addicts or individuals lacking a fixed address, are not necessarily subject to legal-penal sanctions but come to be identified and quantified through RILFEDEUR as indicators of urban “insecurity” when their presence is judged to be inappropriate or disruptive. But whose standards do these judgments reflect? Policy documents describing the development of the classification scheme indicate that the professional conceptualizations of local police personnel were given pride of place. Police personnel played a key role in focus groups and consultations as both end users of the program and “authoritative interlocutors”
(autorevoli interlocutori) or native experts in the field of urban security (Regione Emilia-Romagna n.d. B: 4-6).

This work of distinguishing between social actors is not a new chore for police, in Italy or elsewhere. In his work on the criminalization of migrants in Italy, sociologist Salvatore Palidda argues that, since the rise of industrial production made it necessary to integrate waged laborers into the social order of modern nation-states, police officers have played an important role in differentiating between useful/productive and dangerous/disruptive classes. The role of local police “has been based on the construction of practical knowledge about how to distinguish between social enemies and workers,” enabling the work of “social surgery” through which logics of inclusion and exclusion are put into practice (1999:78). What have changed over time are rather the classificatory logics used to make such distinctions. In the post-war period Italian police were tasked with surveilling and subduing lifetime criminals/organized crime actors as well as collective actors (labor unions, autonomous workers’ movements) whose political claims-making represented a potential (and frequently actual) disruption to capitalist resource distribution and the state monopoly on the use of force. As Palidda writes, the main “enemies” of the police in the past were “subversives, strikers or unrecoverable deviants, that is, the traditional ‘dangerous classes’ or ‘criminal classes’ (1999: 77).

Alongside organized crime, threats to public order were represented by internal labor migrants: in Milano, for instance, the ‘immigrants’ in the 1950s were labor migrants from the lower Padana area and central-northern Italy; these were succeeded in the 1960s and 70s by southern Italians coming to fill waged labor positions in the
booming industrial sectors, a population who ended up forming a disproportionate majority of the prison population in the North (Palidda 1999:80). In the 1990s, as indicated by the semantic shift in associations of the word degrado to indicate the presence of immigrants and homeless people in public places, perceptions of social threat came to focus on foreigners, joined by figures occupying a marginal place in the labor market such as young people, drug addicts and “nomads” (Italian residents of Rom descent). If there is an underlying characteristic shared by these contemporary “threats” it is their un-integrated or possibly un-integrate-able character, which would seem to render their very presence a violation of the “decency of public spaces” and an impediment to “the recognizeability and peacefulness of behaviors in relating with others.”

I think it is important to note, however, that in the RILFEDEUR system the existence of these disruptive figures is not itself a source of insecurity; rather, insecurity is caused by their perceived role in uses of public space. Physical elements of the urban landscape play a very important role in RILFEDEUR categories, from banks, post offices, shops and restaurants to streets, sidewalks, telephone booths, bus stops, piazzas, parks and walls. This focus on safeguarding shared physical space no doubt reflects in part the specific historical character of the local sites RILFEDEUR is designed to

105 By focusing on this shift from internal labor migrants to extra-European migrants as a focus of police surveillance and control, I do not mean to suggest that the earlier targeting of Southern Italian workers as a threat to the security of northern cities was not itself a racializing process. See for instance Mary Gibson’s chapter in J. Schneider’s edited volume on Italy’s ‘Southern Question’ (Schneider 1998), which analyzes racialized representations of Southern Italian backwardness in the work of early criminologist Cesare Lombroso.

106 Rather than drawing a distinction between public space in the sense of state-owned property and private space in the sense of commercial or privately owned property such as stores and restaurants, RILFEDEUR documents suggest a definition of common space as any space that citizens or city residents may freely enter and interact with as they move through their daily lives, which in this case includes all that is outside of the walls that enclose the private domestic space of people’s homes.
improve. In a city like Bologna, whose terrain has been inhabited since the 9th century BC, and which represented one of the most economically and politically important settlements during Roman times and a key papal state in the early modern period, it is difficult to find a single building, piazza or sidewalk that does not have some archeological or historical significance. Across heated disagreements over social and economic strategies, successive city councils since the 1970s have agreed on the need to develop the city center through preserving its artistic/architectural heritage so it can be appreciated by both residents and tourists (Tarozzi 1999:168-169). To some extent, this valorization of the city’s architectural heritage even transcends generational and ideological divides. I have participated in multiple discussions of the social-cultural and artistic value of graffiti, but no matter how enthusiastically people celebrate street artists’ right to express themselves on the public canvas of the city, there is always at least one person who speaks up to assert that the walls of historical buildings should nonetheless remain sacrosanct. Physical space in this case is thus inextricably tied up not only with contesting future-oriented visions of how the city should be but also competing interpretations of its past and the relationship between its past and its future.

At the same time, public space can also be understood as a site where divergent ideas of how people should participate in public life are asserted and contested. Drawing on the lens of political geography, several scholars in anthropology and cultural studies have argued that struggles over physical space in the urban environment of many cities can be read as processes wherein norms of participation in collective life as well as linked categories of inclusion and exclusion are discursively constructed and contested (Holston
and Appadurai 1996, Guano 2004, Appadurai 2001, Zhang 2002). Specific urban populations may assert exclusive definitions of city space in the act of reinforcing their own racial, classed and gendered group identities, simultaneously constructing “normative cartographies of ‘belonging’” for themselves and excluding unwanted element from the physical spaces of public activity (Guano 2004:71). The rules of “civility” canonized in RILFEDEUR classificatory logics can also be read as an effort to map specific cultural-political values and meanings onto shared public space, thereby stigmatizing deviant uses of these spaces.

Back to the rule of law: Mayor Cofferati’s legality campaign

In 1999, Bologna’s position as a stronghold of the political Left was cast into doubt when the mayoral seat was captured by a center-Right candidate for the first time since WWII. Sergio Cofferati, who had built his political career working in CGIL, one of Italy’s largest and most emphatically leftist labor unions, was proposed as the best candidate to retake Bologna. Cofferati won the elections by a strong majority but shortly after taking office and forming his council, he began to surprise – and antagonize – supporters with an unprecedented campaign in favor of legalità (legality).

The ostensible aims and ideological underpinnings of this campaign are expressed in the proposed resolution Legalità e solidarietà per lo sviluppo economico, la coesione e la giustizia sociale (Legality and Solidarity for economic development, cohesion and social justice) presented to the city council November 2, 2005. Cofferati begins by echoing the premises of previous urban security policy in Emilia-Romagna, stating that
city residents often remain unsatisfied with local government activity in part due to “phenomena of blight in some areas of the city and the diffusion of illegal practices and behaviors, which augment residents’ perceptions of insecurity” (City of Bologna Mayor’s Office 2005: 1).

The document uses the vocabulary of a Left Realist approach to crime to establish its leftist credentials, arguing that the development of security policy “must involve the social and economic fabric of the city in a participatory process” including “those most vulnerable to phenomena of blight” and centered on “practices of integration based on respect and tolerance” (City of Bologna Mayor’s Office 2005: 2). It also clearly states that administrators must work to protect the city’s most vulnerable segments and ensure their full-fledged citizenship through focused actions of “solidarity” (azioni solidali) (ibid: 3), a common and defining term of Italian leftist discourse that refers to social justice-oriented and economic redistribution policy. This rhetorical move functions to emphatically distinguish Cofferati’s discourse from previous and contemporary discourses of security and public order produced by Right wing politicians in Italy (and elsewhere) in that it engages a distinctly left-wing emphasis on economic justice.107

107 Cofferati’s legality discourse is also set apart from those produced by the Italian Right by a distinct vocabulary: it avoids phrases such as “national security” and “public order” which figure highly in the vocabulary of the Right. He does obliquely invoke security by suggesting that “a sense of unease and insecurity” pervades the city as a result of recent economic trends like the increasing employment insecurity but, unlike security discourses that discursively constitute an existential threat in order to justify extensions of state power or restrictions on civil liberties, Cofferati’s discourse invokes no suggestively faceless enemy or existential threat; here, the only adversary is illegality itself. There is also no call made for exceptional state power or a suspension or transcendence of conventional political processes. Quite the opposite, Cofferati makes repeated references to the importance of a transparent and participatory process in crafting policy to combat illegality. These references to a sense of insecurity may instead work as a more subtle or affective invocation of a shared feeling of dissatisfaction, the cause of which is clearly attributed to the national economic policies put in place by the Right coalition holding the national
However, Cofferati’s proposal diverges from previous leftist security policy by arguing that the key for achieving “orderly civil coexistence and ensuring the common good” lies not in redistributive policy or education, i.e. preventive measures, but in a strict adherence to the legal code (2). The best way for the city administration to promote the common good, the resolution proposes, is to use the instruments at its disposal – such as municipal police forces – to combat illegality in all of its manifestations. In implementation, however, it became clear that the campaign primarily targeted the countless small-scale and everyday transgressions that comprise everyday urban life; furthermore, Cofferati effectively extended the rule of law to render illegal many activities that had previously only been undesirable or nonstandard.

**Combating “illegality” in Bologna**

One of Cofferati’s first actions in the name of “legality” in spring 2005 was to ban the sale of alcohol from grocery stores in the city center after 9 p.m. and institute a 9 p.m. curfew on alcohol consumption in public places (Amaduzzi 2005). This was followed by a rule that takeaway pizza and kebab places in certain “hot zones” known for hosting late night noise and public drinking must close at 9 p.m., two or three hours before the closing times mandated in other areas (Porqueddu 2006). Then, in the fall of 2005, Cofferati sent police forces and city bulldozers to demolish an unauthorized encampment built by Rom

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government at the time. Whereas terms such as “national security” and “public order” may, especially for Cofferati’s intended Left-wing audience, conjure the specter of a government that protects elite interests and privilege by controlling the dissenting or revolutionary masses, Cofferati presents “legality” as an intrinsically inclusive field that will be beneficial for all, and most beneficial for the most disenfranchised. While “security” may imply repression and the unjust use of force, “legality” is presented as enabling participatory democracy.
people along the banks of the Reno river outside of Bologna. That fall he went on to set
the city police to rounding up the individuals (mainly immigrant men) who stand at
intersections offering the wash drivers’ windshields for money. These *lavavetri*
(windshield-washers) were an appropriate target of the campaign because, Cofferati
explained, the phenomena obviously involves people “acting without any form of
authorization, given that this kind of activity is not covered by any existing ordinance”
(Varesi 2005). A highly-publicized campaign against graffiti was initiated in 2007,
including a proposed rule prohibiting individuals under a certain age from purchasing
spray paint (Bignami 2007), followed by an *ordinanza antibivacco* (anti-bivouac
ordinance) prohibiting people from sitting on the ground in public spaces such as piazzas
(Corriere della Sera 2008) which, given the fact that most Bologna piazzas are not
equipped with permanent seating, effectively dissuaded the use of piazzas to hang out and
drink. In the name of legality, Cofferati also targeted CSOA in the city: he ordered the
closure of one of Bologna’s most antagonistic occupied social centers, Laboratorio
Crash!, and continued to close down the center each time activists re-occupied. In the
past Bolognese administrations had negotiated with social centers to find compromise
spaces acceptable to both the city and activists, but negotiations between Crash and
Cofferati’s council didn’t appear to produce any workable compromise. In 2008 a
longstanding center with support among elected politicians, Vag61, was ordered to cease
their “unauthorized” provision of food and beverages and musical entertainment, a
mainstay of CSOA activity that is usually given a blind eye by authorities (Vag61info:
March 13, 2008). XM24, which occupied a space granted by the previous administration
but without a signed agreement legalizing the arrangement, also came under scrutiny as an example of illegal activity. Though Vag61 and XM24 succeeded in avoiding closure, the message was clear: Bologna’s long-standing compromise with illegality had to end.

While Cofferati’s rhetoric followed leftist norms, these actions taken in the name of legality did not and, in the ‘red’ stronghold of Bologna, the former union leader quickly became the Left politician every Leftist loved to hate. Extra-electoral radical left actors, from participants in the Disobbedienti movement and CSOA scene to civil sphere and professional organizations, were especially vocal in their criticism of Cofferati’s legality campaign.\(^{108}\) The Bologna chapter of the Democratic Jurists association (Giuristi Democratici di Bologna 2005) and representatives of the re-fashioned Communist party (PRC) (Chiarini 2006) denounced Cofferati’s campaign against the Rom encampments as racist infringements of international human rights principles, while public figures from CSOA participants to neighborhood presidents called his anti-urban blight measures misguided and overly repressive (Corriere della Sera 2008). As many critics pointed out, the takeaways and minimarkets targeted by the anti-alcohol measures, in contrast to bars and pubs not affected by the ordinance, were owned almost exclusively by first-generation migrants from Pakistan and Bangladesh. Together with rules against public drinking, graffiti and sitting in public places, the observable elements of this campaign

\(^{108}\) For instance, on November 2, 2005, while Cofferati was presenting his motion to the city council, activists called an open meeting in opposition to the campaign that was attended by hundreds of people. Several people associated with the no-global movement argued that a uniform legal code such as Cofferati proposed cannot function in a just manner under unjust conditions, making it necessary to break the law in order to achieve social change: ‘When Rosa Parks sat in the place reserved for Whites, or workers struck for days and days on end to obtain workers’ rights protections, weren’t they breaking a formal legal framework?’ argued one lawyer (Trotta 2005:2), a woman who often represents political activists in trouble with the law, including XM24 and TPO participants.
seemed to fly in the face of rhetoric about solidarity and social inclusion by
disproportionately affecting marginalized populations such as migrants and unemployed
youth.

But criticism was not confined to the extra-electoral far Left: Cofferati’s
campaign soon came to represent a key point of reference that local political and civil-
sphere figures, including members of the city council itself, used to claim political
territory and amass authority around their own positions. Leaders of the former
Communist and Green parties staked out positions in opposition to Cofferati, forcing key
members of the mayor’s cabinet to choose between allegiance to their own parties and
continued cooperation with “the sheriff,” as he was dubbed in mocking comparison to
former NYC mayor Rudolf Giuliani.\textsuperscript{109} Local political figures used public opposition to
Cofferati to gain altitude on the career ladder.\textsuperscript{110} Local clergy also spoke out against
Cofferati, calling his concept of legality “vague and vacuous;” the director of the catholic
humanitarian organization Caritas used criticism of Cofferati as a chance to forward his
own agenda, saying that “one gets the impression that he wants to make Bologna a city
only for the rich. What is needed are responses to the problems of social exclusion and
the high cost of living [\textit{il carovita}]” (Gulotta 2005). At one point, after boisterous
celebrations of an Italian soccer victory turned into near-riots in the city center, even the

\textsuperscript{109} Individuals are elected to city council in Italy if they receive a sufficiently high proportion of votes
directly from the electorate and separately from the counting of votes for the mayor; the council is thus
made up of multiple members who each represent or are supported by a certain party or electoral list that
may differ from the party represented by the mayor. The mayor goes on to form his own cabinet through
direct appointment.

\textsuperscript{110} The president of the San Vitale neighborhood, for instance, publically complained when students were
ticketed for sitting on the ground in Piazza Verdi “even though they weren’t really bothering anyone”
(Corriere della Sera 2008).
police commissioner publically criticized Cofferati’s campaign, stating that “billy clubs are not enough, it’s necessary to give life back to the university area” (Porqueddu 2006). By 2007, with two years remaining of his time in office, so many council members had stepped down or withdrawn their support that Cofferati officially lost his majority position in the city council (Il Giornale 2007).

Cofferati firmly defended his position and responded to public dissent with a heavy-handed approach that surprised (and outraged) many activists.\footnote{The party he had represented as a candidate, the center-left Partito Democratico, publically supported Cofferati in his campaign; for instance, in October of 2008 they commissioned a special issue of the local newspaper \textit{Il Domani di Bologna}, specialized in reporting about politics. The special issue, which bears the logo of the Partito Democratico on every page, includes interviews with key administration figures and outlines all the positive outcomes of Cofferati’s term to date, such as a decrease in crime rates, “more officers managing urban blight” and new construction projects (\textit{Il Domani di Bologna} September 27, 2008).} When Disobbedienti activists occupied public buildings to protest Cofferati’s new rules in 2005, they ended up in violent conflict with police officers sent to clear the buildings. Several prominent members of the Disobbedienti movement were arrested several days later and Cofferati publically denounced the occupations (Imarisio 2005), implicitly suggesting that there was no significant difference between illegal acts committed in the course of expressing political dissent and other forms of criminality. When a group of students marched on the city council headquarters to protest the repeated demolitions of Rom encampments later that year, police forces physically prevented them from entering the building and more than 30 activists were arrested, causing a scene many compared to the repression of the late 1970s. What is perhaps most significant for my investigation of the forces shaping the treatment of CSOA, however, is that the policy and legislative
campaign launched by Cofferati outlasted his term: subsequent city administrators continued to combat micro-criminality and transgressive behavior through legal-penal tools and target CSOA as phenomena of illegality.  

The mayor’s legality campaign perhaps represented such a convenient target for public criticism because it went against the grain of the preventive approach to urban security that leftist academics and policy-makers had built their careers developing and disseminating over the previous decade. Policy-makers had celebrated their preventive strategy as a distinctly leftist approach to security, and Cofferati’s attempt to usurp these same ideological terms in relation to legality must have represented a serious threat to the discursive authority amassed thus far. Furthermore, the “integrated prevention” approach to urban security had focused on extra-legal and non-penal fields of action, shifting social-cultural understandings of what counts as appropriate or desirable instead of shifting the boundary between legal and illegal spheres themselves. Cofferati’s legality campaign, in contrast, functioned to re-assert the rule of law and the centrality of penal-legal mechanisms. Through multiple ordinances and new tasks for police forces, Cofferati ended up taking

112 Cofferati did not run for a second term, and the platform of the center-left coalition explicitly distanced itself from “Cofferati-ism” through an emphasis on prevention rather than repression. However, the center-left candidate elected in June of 2009 stepped down after less than a year following a misuse of public funds scandal, so it is difficult to evaluate the implementation of this platform through concrete measures. Instead of holding new elections, the national government assigned an administrator (commissario) and assistants (subcommissari) to run the city in the absence of an elected mayor and city council. The new city police regulations (Regolamento di Polizia urbana) issued by this technical government was as repressive if not more harsh than Cofferati’s regulations in relation to phenomena such as noise at night, sitting in public places, graffiti, windshield washers (Il Resto del Carlino 2011).

113 This tension between divergent approaches did not evidently represent an insurmountable obstacle to collaboration, however; one of the key authors of Sicurezza e Territorio went on to work as a very highly paid consultant for Cofferati’s administration as an expert in urban security.
phenomena (such as young people sitting on the ground and drinking late at night) that were previously simply undesirable or deviant and rendering them actually illegal, thus shifting of the boundary between legal and illegal spheres.114

**Controlling territory and governing public space: from a national “security emergency” to spaces of exception**

During the summer of 2008, shortly after I arrived in Bologna, the news media were buzzing with references to an *emergenza sicurezza* (security emergency) sweeping the nation. This alarming phrase hung as a large, colorful banner over a range of apparently unconnected stories: from boats of refugees from Tunisia and Libya arriving on the shores of Italy’s southernmost island of Lampedusa (Sciacca 2008, Corriere della Sera 2008b) to the rape of a Dutch tourist by unidentified assailants but which followed closely on the heels of another attack on tourists by two Romanian migrants (Caretti 2008) to a plan by the Defense and Interior ministers to send military soldiers into five Italian cities to aid in maintaining “public security” (Polchi 2008). What united these varied reports (besides the ever-present “security emergency” banner) was a representation of immigration as a threat to the nation, both from without (migrants arriving at the borders) and from within (migrants as a source of micro-criminality).115 During the hot, humid summer months, while Cofferati pushed forward with his legality campaign in Bologna, this “security emergency” dominated the front pages of national

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114 To clarify, the municipal council does not have the authority to change the national penal code; however, they do have authority and responsibility over the regulatory plan that governs the work of the municipal police force and thereby instruct police to issue tickets for unauthorized phenomena.

115 Though ostensibly deployed to maintain public security, a third of the soldiers sent into Italian cities were tasked with guarding the *centri di identificazione ed espulsione* (identification and expulsion centers, or CIE) where undocumented migrants were held pending expulsion or other legal action.
newspapers and headlined television news reports; by November, however, similar events were reported without the unifying banner. The emergency appeared to be over. But what had changed?

One clear factor in the development of this brief but intensely publicized “emergency” was national political maneuvering, in which security represented a key game piece. Politically Right politicians had been criticizing the government’s approach to security since the center-left coalition led by Romano Prodi took control in 2006, and this criticism explicitly identified immigration as a source of insecurity: for example, a member of Berlusconi’s Forza Italia party stated that “the government needs to intervene immediately with strength and rigor. Enough with the Left’s usual do-goodery [buonismo]. Since Prodi and company arrived, Italians have been terrorized by episodes of violence that are ever more frequently committed by dangerous undocumented immigrants” (Polchi 2007). The government responded with a set of measures in September of 2007 targeting mafia activity, urban micro-criminality (specific laws against vandalism and littering, measures punishing windshield washers with community service) and violent theft (Milella 2007). This security legislation did not, however, include any focus on migrants as a source of criminality. In early spring 2008, the center-left government lost its majority hold on the parliament, leading to its dissolution three years ahead of schedule. Early elections were held and a center-right coalition headed by Silvio Berlusconi won on a platform of national security and immigration control. As subsequent legislation illustrates, Berlusconi’s security model centered on protecting

116 Echoing the language of a sports fan, the name Forza Italia can be translated as “Go, Italy!”
national territory from external threats through increased border control and the expulsion of unwanted elements while simultaneously regulating the occupation and uses of public space within the country.

One of the Prime Minister’s first actions was to issue an emergency _decreto-legge_ (decree-law), a distinctive form of legislation that takes effect as soon as it is published in the public record of laws and regulations without waiting to be converted into law through regular parliamentary procedure.\(^{117}\) This exceptional legislation, titled “Urgent Measures regarding public security” (Misure urgenti in materia di sicurezza pubblica), clearly identifies immigration as a pressing source of insecurity. The introduction reads, “given the extraordinary necessity and urgency of introducing regulations aimed at preparing a more efficient normative framework to counter phenomena of widespread illegality connected to illegal immigration and organized crime…” and goes on to mandate that _stranieri_ (foreigners) sentenced with jail time exceeding two years be expelled from Italian territory (Art. 1, decreto-legge 92/2008)

Following the Israeli bombing of the Gaza strip in December 2008/January 2009, activists staged pro-Palestinian marches in several Italian cities. In Milan and Bologna, these marches terminated in the cities’ central piazzas: Piazza del Duomo in Milan and

\(^{117}\) This public record is the _Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana_ (Official Gazette of the Italian Republic), published by the Istituto Poligrafico e zecca dello stato S.p.a. under the authority of the Ministry of the Economy and Finance; it is consultable online at http://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/. As Giorgio Agamben (2004) argues, Italy has such a long and particular history of using emergency “decree-laws” in the place of democratically approved legislation that it can be considered “a political-legal laboratory” testing how this exceptional power can be used and normalized (16). Specifically, though it was used by various parliamentary monarchies throughout the 1880s, this power was formalized through a fascist-era law from 1926 that authorized the use of the “decree-law” in “extraordinary situations, in which it is required for reasons of urgent and absolute necessity” (17). It was left up to parliament itself, however, to verify this urgent necessity.
Piazza Maggiore in Bologna. Just before 5 p.m., at the time scheduled for the *maghrib* or sunset prayer, Muslim participants knelt and prayed where they were, in front of the Catholic cathedrals facing onto these central squares. Although representatives of the Catholic Church accepted the assurances of Muslim organizations in Italy that no offense was intended, representatives of the far right denounced the “affront” to “sacred spaces” represented by this act of Muslim prayer in public spaces that had traditionally been dominated by Catholicism. In Bologna, representatives of the Lega Nord staged a counter-protest against the “unauthorized and theatrical” pro-Palestinian march, calling it an “affront to the residents/citizens [*cittadini*] of Bologna.” They sought to re-assert the exclusive cultural-political character of this space by declaring their intention to “re-conquer Piazza Maggiore” (Il Resto del Carlino 2009).

The Defense Minister, a member of Berlusconi’s Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, or PdL) party, held an emergency meeting to “respond to this provocation, this challenge to peace carried out by those who a few days ago transformed the forecourt of the Duomo into an open-air mosque” (Dazzi 2009). Shortly after, the Ministry of the Interior released the so-called “Maroni decree” (January 26, 2009) that governs and restricts public gatherings. Specifically, this decree gives local authorities the right to prohibit or restrict assembly in areas that are “strongly symbolic for social, cultural and

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118 Reflecting the key political, social and economic role the Catholic Church has played in Italian history, central piazzas in Italian cities and towns are almost always built around Catholic churches or cathedrals. The church of San Petronio, Bologna’s patron saint, faces onto Piazza Maggiore in Bologna, but it is important to note that the piazza itself is public space, regularly hosting everything from commercial trade fairs to film screenings and rock concerts. The uproar following Muslim prayer in these spaces clearly indicates, however, that public space in Italy is not secular simply by virtue of being owned by the state and accessible to all; rather, it is visibly and persistently imbued with a specifically and exclusively Catholic character.
religious reasons” as well as areas that normally host an elevated number of people. Reflecting the importance of religion as a marker in the cultural-political conflicts that gave rise to this legislation, spaces of ‘high symbolic significance’ were immediately understood in news reports to refer primarily to cathedrals and other Catholic sites.

Silvio Troilo, law professor at the University of Bergamo, helps us understand the Maroni decree in relation to the Italian constitution and legal precedent (2011). He notes that freedom of assembly is protected by the Italian constitution (article 17), and usually this freedom can only be restricted for very specific and explicit reasons of “public order.” 119 Concrete justification is required to prohibit assembly before the fact and it is very difficult to establish a priori that any potential assembly represents a threat to public order. Existing laws and legal precedent thus make it very difficult to justify restrictions on the enactment of the right of assembly itself. 120 However, there is really nothing keeping the provincial directors of police forces from restricting the times and places

119 This article protects freedom of assembly on the conditions that the gathering in question is peaceful and unarmed, and that gatherings held in public spaces are announced to the relevant authorities ahead of time. Spontaneous gatherings, such as a crowd of people celebrating a sport victory, are exempt from this requirement for advance notice (Troilo 2011:1-3).

120 Law no. 773 of June 18, 1931 law passed in 1931 by the fascist state does establish additional justifications for restricting freedom of assembly, including reasons of public health, morality or lack of advance notice; it specifies that an assembly may be broken up in cases of “protests or shouting that is seditious or damaging to the prestige of authorities” or actions that represent a danger to public order or the safety of citizens (Troilo 2011:5-6). Furthermore, there is some precedent to restricting the right to assembly: in 1976, the Minister of the Interior encouraged local prefects to take advantage of the abovementioned fascist-era law to disallow the electoral meetings of the far right Movimento Sociale Italiano-Destra Nazionale coalition, and in the spring of 1977 the prefect of Rome prohibited all public protests in the province for several short periods (ibid: 10). These measures were taken in periods of widespread and violent political unrest, however. In general, Troilo argues, Italian courts have been very cautious in applying such restrictions. They have read “seditious” phenomena very narrowly in relation to protest, effectively including only activity that is clearly violates existing law and which involves rebellion or outright incitement to subversion, concretely contributing to harming public order (6). The judicial consensus, therefore, is that no matter how harshly critical or disrespectful its sentiments, an assembly cannot legitimately be broken up unless it includes so many armed or otherwise dangerous participants that it represents a clear threat to bystanders (7).
people may gather (2011:7). The 2009 Ministerial Decree takes advantage of this legal loophole to addresses not the right of assembly per se, but rather the right of citizens to *use specific public places* for the purposes of assembly (11). In Bologna, for instance, local authorities implemented the decree by banning public protest in the main commercial streets of the city center and connected public spaces (including Piazza Maggiore) on Saturdays and Sundays, when these areas are filled with throngs of shoppers and Sunday strollers. Significantly, gatherings of a religious nature were excluded from the restrictions.

**From public order to immigrant criminality**

A few months later, the ministry released another collection of legislation, law number 94 of July 15, 2009. Although it bears the generic title “Disposizioni in materia di sicurezza pubblica” (regulations regarding public security), this legislation is even more specifically focused on governing, on one hand, the population of migrants in Italy and, on the other hand, public expressions of dissent. It functions to delimit migrants as a population through measures impede integration through marriage and naturalization while simultaneously consolidating the security tools (detention, expulsion) reserved specifically for migrants. First and foremost, it creates a new crime: that of “illega...
Thanks to pressure from the Lega Nord, the decree also prolongs from 60 days to 6 months the period that individuals can be held in migrant detention centers (centri di identificazione e espulsione, or CIE) while their cases are being processed. The decree also erects barriers between migrants and state services by requiring that individuals display a valid Permit to Stay (Permesso di Soggiorno) for most interactions with state agencies, such as signing up for school or registering the birth of a child. Finally, in relation to expressions of dissent, the 2009 decree re-introduces an historical crime of “offense to public officials,” defined as offending, in public space, any official occupied in carrying out his or her official duties.

According to many Italian jurists, the measures included in the 2009 decree are incoherent and largely unenforceable; a year after the decree was passed, very few trials for “illegal entry and stay” had actually been held, and only 5% of the 3,000 undocumented migrants detained by authorities had been expelled (Femmininis 2010). In terms of symbolic value, however, the decree has enormous significance. While “integrated prevention” approaches to urban security functioned to transfer the focus of legislation established numeric limits on the number of authorized incoming migrants in accordance with the perceived needs of Italian industry (Angel-Ajani 2000:335-337).

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122 Formerly called centri di permanenza temporanea (temporary stay centers, or CPT), these structures were created by the legge Turco-Napolitano (Law number 40 of 1998) passed under the center-Left Prodi government and designed to hold migrants who could not prove their positive legal status until they could be identified and, potentially, expelled. From their inception they were unique and unprecedented among Italian institutions in that never before was it possible to detain individuals who had not committed any crime. With the creation of “illegal entry and stay” as an official crime, of course, this dubious distinction is null.

123 After highly publicized and heated opposition from the medical community, the final draft of the decree left out a previously proposed measure that would have required medical professionals to report undocumented patients to the authorities; however, seeing as undocumented status in itself became illegal through this legislation, all state employees are theoretically required to report undocumented migrants they encounter as guilty of the crime of being irregular.
state power and legitimacy to the local level, this national security legislation re-focuses attention on the role and primacy of the central state. Through measures that regulate uses of public space and discipline specific populations currently associated with criminality and public disorder, this legislation functions to reify the ideal of the rule of law in the course of asserting state authority and relevance.

Paradoxically, this assertion of the rule of law has occurred in large part through the creation of “spaces of exception,” that is, spaces wherein the individual becomes *homo sacer*, a “bare” figure stripped of all conventional legal and political traits or entitlements (Agamben 1998: 50-59). The paradigmatic example of this space of exception for Agamben is the camp, whether refugee camp or concentration camp, in which “enemy bodies” are excluded or excepted from the sphere of state-sponsored legality (ibid:168-169). Migrant detention centers in Italy exemplify a contemporary version of Agamben’s camp as a space of exception: before undocumented status was transformed into a crime with law 94/2009, individuals held in these enormous structures had committed no crimes; their confinement represented an exception to the rule of law that restricts authorities’ right to detain an individual not yet accused of a crime. Detained migrants continue to exist in a state of exception as they are confined without appeal or legal representation, with no recourse to conventional legal protections and arguably in violation of international human rights legislation. In this case we also see the surgical *selectivity* of this modern state tool of creating exceptions (Butler 2004), as undocumented migrants are specifically distinguished through and targeted by Italian security legislation. If we examine migrant treatment through security legislation as a
whole, we see the that migrants are singled out for exclusion while simultaneously being targeted for hyper-surveillance and exceptional legal-penal control.

The legal hyper-visibility of migrants is even more striking if juxtaposed with the near invisibility of non-heterosexual and non-gender-normative individuals as rights-bearing subjects, whatever their citizenship status. In the last decade, this legal invisibility has been repeatedly reproduced through legislative (in)action and justified through political discourse, most notably through exclusion from the institution of marriage so central to the Italian constitution: “The republic,” declares article 29, “recognizes the rights of the family as a natural society based on marriage.” Marriage is thus the basis of some of the most important rights and protections in Italian law, from inheritance and adoption to welfare provisions and citizenship through naturalization or familial reunion. Although the first law to recognize civil unions was proposed in 1998, it was never put to a vote in the Italian parliament; multiple subsequent efforts in the late 1990s and early 2000s also fell by (or were pushed to) the wayside, thanks in large part to a strong Catholic presence throughout the political spectrum. The center-left Prodi government was ostensibly considering a form of civil union in 2007, but it was explicitly not among the coalition’s main priorities and had not yet been voted on a year later when the government prematurely collapsed.

The subsequent center-right governments have likewise refused to address marriage inequality, despite repeated human rights resolutions by the European Parliament strongly encouraging member states to abolish forms of institutionalized discrimination and equalize rights among citizens. Following multiple legal appeals by
same-sex couples to gain recognition, the Italian constitutional court finally passed an ambivalent ruling (no. 138 of 2010): they declared that there is no constitutional obligation to open marriage itself to same-sex couples, but that homosexual couples are owed (si spettano) some form of civil-legal recognition through action by the legislative branch. The issue has thus been definitively put into the hands of the parliament, who have as yet doggedly avoided addressing it. Despite highly publicized episodes of anti-gay violence, minority parliamentarians have repeatedly failed (in the spring of 2011 and again in the summer of 2011) to pass a law defining homophobia as an aggravating circumstance of physical assault (Pasqua 2011, La Repubblica 2011b). While migrants are singled out by Italian security legislation, the “exceptional” space of legal non-protection in this case has been created through refusal to acknowledge queer subjects as legitimate rights-bearers or claimants. When the center-right government took over in 2008, the website of the Ministry for Equal Opportunities actually removed all content mentioning homosexual, transgender and transsexual people, and the ministry dissolved a commission that had been established (in 2007) to support the development of law and policy favoring equal rights and protections for GLBT Italians. The official stand of the most recent center-right government, as expressed by the conspicuously inactive Equal Opportunities Minister, is that non-heterosexuals in Italy do not require “special” protections because they are not discriminated against; this position effectively

124 When asked to provide institutional sponsorship for Gay Pride events in 2008, the Equal Opportunities Minister (Ministro per le Pari Opportunità) Mara Carfagna, former Miss Italy contestant, TV showgirl and topless model, stated that “Gay Pride [events] are not needed” (Non servono, i Gay Pride). She simultaneously denied and reproduced institutionalized discrimination against queer people by saying she would reserve her institutional support for events and entities that are working to oppose forms of
obscures the myriad legal anomalies and exclusions characterizing the position of GLBT citizens, not to mention non-citizens.

These two cases, one of legal hyper-visibility and the other of determined neglect, can be read as two sides of the same coin. As Agamben suggests, the value of examining “bare life” in spaces of exception is precisely to reveal how the exception in fact functions as the foundation of the rule (of law). He demonstrates that the denial of rights is at the foundation of the state power to grant or recognize rights and the ability to make an exception from the rule of law represents the foundation of the authority to deploy the rule of law. This state of affairs in which the rule depends on the exception (and might easily be withheld or retracted) reveals the true fragility not only of *homo sacer* but of *all* political subjects in terms of security and the exercise of rights (2004). Indeed, Žižek sounds a similar warning in Welcome to the Desert of the Real (2002) when he argues that despite its mediatic hyper-visibility, the figure of the fundamentalist terrorist is not the true object of security policy but rather functions to justify internal discipline, in that the US government’s ostensive defense of democratic rights abroad has meant the suspension of these same rights at home. We would do well to pay attention to contemporary securitization processes and spaces of exception, theorists thus warn, lest we find that “emergency” extensions of state power, justified through the vocabulary of a discrimination and violence; this does not describe Gay Pride events, which are “only” aimed at gaining official recognition for gay [sic] couples, a move she does not support (Arachi 2008). “I believe homosexuality is no longer a problem” she continued, “at least not like the organizers of these protests would have us believe. The times in which homosexuals were declared mentally ill are long gone. Today, societal integration exists” (Io credo che l'omosessualità non sia più un problema. Perlomeno così come ce lo vorrebbero far credere gli organizzatori di queste manifestazioni. Sono sepolto i tempi in cui gli omosessuali venivano dichiarati malati di mente. Oggi l'integrazione nella società esiste) (ibid).
war with no foreseeable end, have permanently eroded the legal and political protections most citizens take for granted.

**Interrogating the articulation of migration and security in the European Union and Italy**

The linkage of immigration and insecurity in public discourse certainly predates my arrival in Bologna, but it was not always so commonsense. A survey of the archive of *La Repubblica*, one of Italy’s leading dailies and associated with the center-left, shows that when the phrase emergenza sicurezza was used in the 1980s and 1990s, it described either workplace accidents or local crime sprees, such as a series of murders in Milan in 1999 (Terragni 2001) or a rash of robberies in Palermo in 2004 (La Repubblica 2004). It was in the late 1990s that national public discourse about security began to regularly and frequently identify immigrants as a source of criminality and immigration in general as a source of insecurity (Diamante and Bordignon 2001).

To understand this shift, I look to the larger context of European Unification. As Cris Shore finds in his ethnographic study of EU policy makers, a central concern of the ‘architects’ of the EU has been the formation of a collective European identity based on shared history and cultural values (2000). The long history of non-western and non-white diaspora communities in Europe has been all but erased from dominant representations of European tradition (Carter 1994, Lutz 1997), allowing immigrants from non-European nations to be represented as possessing “incommensurable cultural difference” which threatens the imagined integrity of EU ‘European-ness’ (Stolcke 1995). While the
“cultural difference” of non-European immigrants may not be given a strictly biological basis as with traditional racism, it is nonetheless viewed in essentialist terms (Angel-Ajani 2000) and may articulate with socio-biological models in some contexts (Balibar 1991), thus rendering the figure of migrant innately extraneous to European (supra-)national identity. As new states joined the EU, they harmonized their laws regarding citizenship and social integration; at the foundation of this process, Gregory Edelman argues, is a “territorial imaginary” shared by EU policy makers, an imaginary that posits “an isomorphic relationship between people, culture, territory, and state” (2005: 676) in which cultural and nation-state boundaries are treated as overlapping. In this imaginary, the putative cultural difference of ethnic, racial and religious minorities within a given territory represents a potential threat to be targeted and managed.

Alongside, fed by and in turn fueling this process of supra-national identity construction, are the technical and professional processes of EU development. Although political and media treatments of the events of 9/11 have reinforced and publicized the linkage of immigration and (in)security, Huysmans argues that the origins of this discursive and policy linkage predate recent anti-terrorism discourse and can instead be traced to the technocratic formation of the European Union. In the post-war period migration in Europe was primarily the object of labor law and economic policy, representing a means of importing the cheap and flexible workforce required for growing industries in many European states (Huysmans 2006:65). When economic changes in the late 1960s and 1970s reduced the need for these guest workers, migration policies became more restrictive. In the formation of the internal market, policy makers took the
first steps toward constructing the heavily controlled and restricted ‘Fortress Europe’
model of the European Union by distinguishing between the free movement of member
state nationals, on one side, and extra-union nationals on the other (66).

As the unification process accelerated with the consolidation of the internal labor
market and the 1985 Schengen agreement that opened borders between EU states,
immigration became increasingly “Europeanized,” that is to say, there were efforts to
harmonize immigration policy and control measures between member states. According
to Huysmans, the common premise underpinning this policy was the need to restrict
population flows (2006: 67). The decisive move to “securitize” immigration thus came
with the development of an “internal security field” within the EU. Following the
classically Westphalian model of the nation-state as a sovereign entity with inviolable
borders, EU policy makers sought maintain control over “who and what can legitimately
enter the space of free movement” by harmonizing and strengthening external border
controls (69). Policy makers, focused on borders as ensuring the internal integrity and
safety of the nation, were concerned that free movement within the EU would also
facilitate the circulation of criminality and illegal migrants. They were thus motivated to
bring immigration management firmly into the sphere of crime prevention and border
control; or, in other words, into the sphere of security (70-71).

As Angel-Ajani points out, in Italy the move to bring immigration control into the
sphere of security came not so much from internal as from supra-national pressures. In
the 1990s, as part of the harmonization process and in view of Italy’s position as a
‘gateway’ from Africa into ‘Fortress Europe’, EU authorities pushed Italy to develop
stricter immigration controls (Angel-Ajani 2000:337). From this beginning, however, the
Lega Nord party has been key in pushing immigration control to the top of Italian
political agendas. The larger field of security discourse already existed: thanks to
increasing anti-mafia campaigns and the tangentopoli corruption trials in the early 1990s,
alongside the urban security policy I’ve described above, tropes of ‘law and order’ were
at the center of public attention and becoming an important element of national political
maneuvering in the 1990s. In this setting, the Lega Nord’s immigrant-focused security
discourse has gained significant currency. Unlike security discourses that function to
unite a national community against external threats, however, the Lega Nord’s brand of
security discourse functions to conceptually segment and delimit the Italian political
community by distinguishing between native-born Italians and “criminal” foreigners.

The Lega Nord has risen to national prominence over the course of the 1990s
thanks in part to its on-again, off-again alliance with Berlusconi’s parties (Forza Italia,
Casa delle Libertà then Popolo della Libertà). The Lega Nord’s mix of fiscal federalism,
regionalist pride and social welfare defense has successfully appealed to working-class
voters in the North, voters who are not captured by the libertarian-conservative and
nationalist orientation of Forza Italia’s discourse. Berlusconi’s center-right coalitions
have thus courted the Lega Nord to benefit from this electoral support. Given the
ideological differences, this alliance has been stormy and unstable, collapsing repeatedly

\[125^\text{For example, Antonio Di Pietro, who as a judge played a key role in the tangentopoli trials, has}
\text{successfully used a pro-rule of law position as the calling card of his political career and central element of}
\text{his center-left party Italia dei Valori (Italy of Values) through statements denouncing tax evasion,}
\text{organized crime and political corruption. The “law and justice” focus of Italia dei Valori statements hails}
\text{all Italians in developing a more keen and united national civic consciousness, one based on a commitment}
\text{to law and order as the basis of modern civilization.}\]
in highly publicized rancor; in the end, security (and more specifically immigration control) has represented a key shared issue helping to maintain the alliance.\(^\text{126}\) As a result, the Lega Nord has disproportionately contributed to drafting security legislation since Berlusconi’s most recent government took power in 2008, not least through Minister of Defense Roberto Maroni, a Lega Nord member. It was the Lega, for instance, who pushed for longer detention times in the country’s CIE (Femminis 2010) and proposed additional measures left out of the final legislation, such as differential sentencing for undocumented immigrants convicted of crimes in Italy (Progetto Verona 2011).

“Fast-capitalism” and existential uncertainty

Far-right parties and movements throughout Europe have no doubt been instrumental in disseminating fears of immigration as a security threat in the last decades, but many scholars suggest we look beneath this political instrumentalization to identify the underlying processes that contribute to the success of current xenophobic agendas. In his analysis of Austria’s far-right “Freedom Party,” Andre Gingrich argues that immigration control and xenophobia, though highly-publicized positions, are only part of the appeal of neo-nationalist parties for many of their voters; equally if not more

\(^\text{126}\) Another interesting point of overlap can be seen in the class-specific gendered cultural idioms that both Berlusconi and Lega Nord leaders use in communicating and presenting themselves in public: while the majority of legislation passed by the PdL rather obviously extends and protects the privileges of elite populations, Berlusconi himself consistently performs a populistically ‘uncouth’ or ‘rough’ version of masculinity built around sexual conquest and a ‘roguish’ disdain for middle-class sexual values and professional norms. This is similar to the aggressively gendered ‘rude’ language and gestures often used by Lega Nord representatives in expressing their autonomy from what they represent as the corrupt, spineless ranks of career politicians populating the central government. The two parties thus find common ground in performances of a kind of anti-bourgeois masculinity that sets them apart from the ‘effete’ intellectualism attributed to the Italian political left. Interestingly, Gingrich (2005) finds similar performances of classed and raced masculinity are central to the political identity of supporters of Austria’s far-right Freedom party, for instance when they express fears about downward mobility by accusing EU policy makers of trying to bring them down to the level of “immigrants and women” (200-208).
important are the party’s positions on the economic and social questions that take on pressing importance in individuals’ daily lives (2005). More broadly, Douglas Holmes (2000) argues that “integralist” xenophobia and local cultural chauvinism have been pushed to national and supra-national agendas in large part as a defensive move against the effects of what Holmes terms “fast-capitalism” but which might otherwise be called advanced or globalized neoliberal capitalism.

For Holmes, fast-capitalism is a “corrosive” system that functions to “flatten those pre-existing frameworks of social meaning upon which our understanding of industrial democracies rest,” thereby disrupting “fundamental claims, social distinctions, and material dispensations” and transforming “the conceptual and the relational powers of ‘society’” (5). In other words, advanced neoliberal capitalism has undermined the foundations of how we make sense of the world and generated intense uncertainty about the future. In the course of trying to engage with the modern world without losing their sense of themselves in time and space, northern Italians such as Holmes’ informants and the populations forming the power base of the Lega Nord have developed “integralist” cultural frameworks of meaning and idioms of solidarity based on local ethnic belonging that effectively excludes migrants and other non-locals. The figure of the incommensurably different foreigner as security threat thus serves to prop up the foundations of local ethnic identity in the face of an unrelenting uncertainty generated by the cultural and temporal modes of globalized neoliberal capitalism.

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127 Holmes’ research focused on the local autonomist party Movimento Friuli. As Holmes notes (204n.3), however, subsequent to his fieldwork this project has been taken up by the Lega Nord, which itself represents the merging of multiple local parties and movements.
To understand this historically specific uncertainty or fear, I turn to the three elements of security that Zygmunt Bauman outlines in *In Search of Politics* (1999). Unpacking the German word for security, *Sicherheit*, Bauman identifies three distinct elements that form the necessary conditions for us to feel secure and act confidently in the world: *security* (a sense of stability of one’s life, a surety that “the world is steady and reliable, and so are its standards of propriety”), *certainty* (the state of being able to make the useful conceptual distinctions that are the basis of daily choices and decisions) and *safety* (the invulnerability of one’s body and its “extensions” in “property, home and neighborhood”) (17). It is easy to mistake, Bauman argues, the effects of uncertainty for the effects of insecurity and so on; our sense of anxiety is usually unspecific, and in seeking clear and addressable targets we tend to attribute fears generated by the first two elements of insecurity to the third one: physical insecurity (18). This obscures the fact that our current fears and discontents come primarily from changing political economy, and specifically the employment insecurity produced by neoliberal employment policies and associated ‘flexibility’ demanded of workers in today’s highly plastic economy (20-21). Furthermore, with the erosion of nation-state economic sovereignty in favor of international and non-democratic institutions and actors such as the Bretton Woods institutions, financial rating agencies and the European Central bank, people are increasingly faced with the realization that there is no one they can really turn to with their concerns.128 As Bauman writes in his characteristically evocative style, “present-day

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128 Leora Auslander (2000) echoes this idea with a cultural focus when she argues that the globalization of culture and the expansion of the EU governance apparatus has lead to the
insecurity is akin to the feeling that the passengers of a plane may feel with they discover that the pilot’s cabin is empty – that the friendly captain’s voice was merely a replay of an old recorded message” (20).

In Italy, the effects of labor law reforms carried out in the 1990s and early 2000s that dismantled protections and enabled short term and temporary employment are being felt keenly at the current moment as widespread employment insecurity (called precarietà or “precariousness” by Italians). Mass media reports daily update Italians on the progress of the country’s crisis and the government’s lack of success in turning it around, not to mention the many geographically and politically remote institutional actors (e.g. the European Central Bank, international rating agencies) whose power over the macro forces that affect people’s lives is unmatched by any form of democratic accountability. The global economic crisis is filtered locally through austerity measures introduced since the 1990s as part of the process of entering the ‘Eurozone’ common currency market and accelerated since 2008 by a center-right government intent on distinguishing itself from the ‘tax and spend’ Left.

In this context, grinding increases in the cost of living are largely unmatched by social service provision and exacerbated by ballooning unemployment, especially among young people: nearly 30% of Italians aged 18-24 were officially unemployed in 2011, a encroachment of the sovereignty of the national culture model, generating culturally defensive reactions such as the Bavarian campaign to defend the presence of crucifixes in public schools against an EU court ruling mandating their removal. No doubt a similar argument could be made about a similar Italian campaign, ultimately successful, to retain crucifixes in public places such as schools and court rooms.
record level that continues to rise (Corriere della Sera 2011). For a recent nationwide day of protest against public education cuts, students in cities throughout Italy marched with signs declaring “siamo tutti precari ormai (by now, we are all precarious) and “noi la vostra crisi non la paghiamo” (we’re not going to pay for your crisis!) (l’Unità 2011). Many unemployed or insecurely employed young people feel themselves the hardest-hit by recent economic policy shifts, but their grievances seem to be ignored or even held against them by elected decision makers: at a conference on innovation, scientific research and opportunities for young people held June 2011 in Rome, the Minister of Public Administration, a People of Freedom party member, had just finished speaking when a group of young activists representing a precarious workers’ network asked to come on stage. The Minister invited them up, but the moment the young female spokesperson uttered the word “precarious” the minister immediately turned his back on them and walked off the stage. As he hurried away under the flash of countless cameras, he announced to the crowd that “[these people are] the worst of Italy” (questa é la peggiore Italia) (Corriere della Sera 2011b).129

Inter-generational tensions in Italy take shape in a context of demographic shift characterized by low fertility among native-born Italian women alongside higher birthrates among young immigrant women from outside the EU and an aging baby boom generation. Elizabeth Krause finds that scientific discourses about contemporary Italian demographics, picked up and circulated by the media, use alarmist language to paint a

129 Video footage of the event is available online at http://www.corriere.it/politica/11_giugno_14/brunetta-precari_faba74c8-96cb-11e0-82d5-f9e2fd481445.shtml
disturbing scene in which low fertility means more pensioners and fewer taxpayers, weakening the country’s capacity to provide for its citizens and maintain global competitiveness (Krause 2001, 2006:2-3, Krause and Marchesi 2007: 14). Immigration (read through a racist lens) figures highly in these representations as the implicit flipside of low fertility: if native-born Italian women are not having enough babies, the alarmist representations suggest, the gap will be filled by immigrants, elements foreign to the Italian national body (Krause 2006). Low fertility is thus read in relation to increasing immigration from outside the EU and, in this light, has come to be represented as (yet another) threat to “social cohesion” (Krause and Marchesi 2007). Through the lens of demographics as well, the insecurities of Italians are once again channeled into a sense of physical insecurity, directed dramatically toward migrants and more generally toward all (socially, economically, politically) marginalized populations together with physical spaces, their cleanliness, repair, symbolic integrity and social recognizeability.

**Occupied, self-managed social centers in the field of security discourse**

The sprawling building that houses XM24 faces, on one side, a busy arterial road connecting residential and industrial neighborhoods to the city center and main train station. On the other side, past the center’s outdoor seating area, there is an enormous unused space, an empty expanse of land stretching away to the train tracks visible in the distance. This eyesore is hidden from the view of passing motorists by a tall wooden fence, painted the yellow of workplace safety warnings. Thanks to the visual screen provided by the fence, the deserted area has long been the province of drug dealers,
injection drug users and others seeking a hidden spot for their illegal activity or simply a place to rest free from potential surveillance. Walking beyond the small courtyard area cleaned and refurbished by social center participants, unwary adventurers soon find themselves in an urban wasteland of waist-high weeds, chunks of broken asphalt from the former market’s loading areas and a sea of used syringes, condoms and other litter.

Like many Italian municipalities, Bologna has little land available for construction within the city due to a combination of centuries of packed-together construction and firm zoning restrictions, which makes this open space is both unusual and highly valuable. Already in the late 1980s, before the fruit and vegetable market was closed, the city’s urban planners had identified the land (much of which already belonged to the city) as a key asset and intended to develop it following the 19th century grid pattern of large residential buildings with internal courtyards that characterizes the rest of the neighborhood (City of Bologna Regulatory Plan 1985-1989, cited in Mammana 2008: 39-40). However, initial plans were abandoned when the city council changed hands from a center-left party to the first ever center-right administration to hold the mayor’s office since WWII. The new administration started a new planning process, focused on developing the area as an asset for the city as a whole rather than serving the neighborhood’s housing needs per se. Planners envisioned a huge complex to act as headquarters for all the offices of the municipal administration, which at that point were scattered throughout the city.

The resulting construction, completed in 2010, comprises a 33,000 square meter complex composed of four buildings, three housing offices and one a multi-level parking
structure. The complex includes a nursery, post office, restaurants and shops as well as the offices of city administrative services (Redazione Iperbole 2008: il progetto). Much of the remaining area is slated for luxury high-rise residential buildings, other parts for a public park and bike trails. With the new city headquarters drawing people to the area, the remaining unused land has taken on even more urban planning and economic value and public attention to the area has visibly increased. This is the backdrop for the two cases I want to examine, the first a neighborhood council meeting from 2005 about the future prospects of the ex-market area that implicitly identifies XM24 as a blight on the area and impediment to future development, the second a media campaign from 2008 by local Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance) candidates using urban security discourses to define XM24 as a source of blight.

The diffusion of illegality into the fabric of daily life: CSOA as “urban blight”

The administrative designation for the area that includes the ex-market is the Navile neighborhood. In 2005 the 20-member Navile neighborhood council was dominated by the local center-left party but with a healthy minority of far left, center and far right parties.\(^{130}\) At a weekly meeting in October 2005, one of the National Alliance members presented an agenda item asking the neighborhood council to take a position on

\(^{130}\) On the left, Centro Sinistra per Navile or “Center Left for Navile” held 12 seats, the re-fashioned Communist party 2 seats; on the right, the “National Alliance” party (including both Democratic Christian and former fascist elements through its incorporation in the 1990s of the Movimento Sociale Italiano - Destra Nazionale or Italian social movement – National Right party) held 3 seats, the center-right “House of Liberty” (Silvio Berlusconi’s vehicle of the moment, an eclectic mix of former socialist, liberal and conservative elements) locally designated as “House of Liberty - Bologna is Yours” held 2 seats, and the Lega Nord held 1 seat.
the city’s plans for the ex-market area.\textsuperscript{131} This proposal, in the course of criticizing how the city administration goes about making plans without consulting the neighborhood council, asks the council to take a stand against the social center XM24. The proposal begins:

Given that the area where the Fruit and Vegetable Market was located has for some years now remained largely unused; that in said area there is currently a youth social center [centro sociale giovanile] that has created and continues to create problems of social order for the citizens resident in the surrounding area, as well as a center for the elderly that in contrast carries out an important social and recreational activity for its members and the elderly of the area;

Here the proposal condemns XM24 by contrasting it with the community center next door, which is registered as a center for the elderly but offers multicultural art, language and dance classes for all ages as well as after school activities in collaboration with the local school district. The juxtaposition contrasts “problems of social order” with “important social and recreational activities.” In so doing it also references the populations each center serves: unruly young people on one side and elderly local residents on the other. Given that prior to the 1980s Bolognina was largely settled by successive waves of native Italian workers drawn to its artisanal and light industrial sectors and subsequently by young immigrant families who often work elsewhere in the city (Mammana 2008: 36-38), this reference to elderly residents also implicitly valorizes the (by now elderly) native Italian residents in favor of the ostensibly extraneous youth, be they native Italian, new migrants or the Italian born children of migrant parents.

\textsuperscript{131} OdG n. 66/2005, espressione di parere in merito alla permuta di parte dell’area ex mercato ortofrutticolo e successive localizzazioni urbanistiche or “expression of judgment regarding the exchange of a part of the ex-fruit and vegetable market area and successive urban planning localizations.”
Furthermore, both XM24 and the nearby community center offer many of the same free courses and activities. In addition to their target users, a key difference underpinning this strategic juxtaposition must therefore lie in their legal status: an officially registered cultural/recreational association presumably paying subsidized rent to the property owner as is customary for registered Italian associations versus a non-institutional, unregistered grouping with an ambiguous legal right to use the property it occupies.\footnote{Specifically, the city council offered the property to several allied activist groups in 2002 as a compromise to induce them to leave the space they were illegally occupying at the time, but no written document ever existed formalizing this agreement.} Ambiguous legality is here associated with a disturbance of the social order, implying that state-based legality is a requisite of orderly social life. Indeed, the proposal goes on to explicitly frame the issue in terms of security, declaring that:

\begin{quote}
…the valorization and requalification of the ex-Fruit and Vegetable Market constitutes an enormous advantage for the surrounding area in terms of the well-being and security of residents during the conduct of daily life, as well as prestige, economic value and the decorum of private property.\footnote{The original Italian reads: “premesso che ormai da diversi anni l’area nella quale sorgeva il Mercato Ortofrutticolo risulta essere non utilizzata se non in minima parte; che in detta area è tutt’oggi presente un centro sociale giovani che ha creato e crea problemi di ordine sociale alla cittadinanza residente nelle vicinanze, nonché un centro anziani che al contrario svolge un’importante attività sociale e ricreativa per i soci e per gli anziani della zona;” and the third paragraph reads, “ritenendo che la valorizzazione e la riquilificazione dell’area ex Mercato Ortofrutticolo costituisce per la zona circostante un enorme vantaggio in termini di benessere e sicurezza dei cittadini durante lo svolgimento della vita quotidiana, nonché prestigio, valore economico e decoro delle proprietà private;”}
\end{quote}

Here we see the logic of urban security outlined in previous sections in that “security” is a correlate of “well-being” (benessere) and something that is experienced – or threatened – in the course of daily life. An important element of this notion of security is the “decorum” (decoro) of private property, which I understand to mean it’s being used according to prevailing social and legal codes. Xm24, with its loud punk and hip hop

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concerts, unleashed dogs, mural-covered walls and crowds of rowdy young people with
dreaded hair and ripped black clothes, does not constitute a decorous use of property in
this framework. As such, it cannot represent a valuable resource to the neighborhood no
matter how many free yoga and Italian language classes it offers.

Judging from the detailed minutes of the meeting where it was presented, this
agenda item triggered a very heated and revealing debate among council members. A
council member from the re-formulated Communist Party (PRC) objected that the effort
to contrast XM24 and the old folks center was ideologically motivated (*strumentale*), to
which a National Alliance member (not the proposal’s author) replied that the proposal
was accurate, in that “the elderly people’s center collaborates” while in contrast, “drugs
are used inside center XM24.” In the dry language of the minutes taker, this council
member goes on to “narrate some episodes that support this declaration.” Though he does
not say outright that XM24 does not collaborate with the authorities, he eliminates it as a
potentially legitimate civic actor by virtue of hosting illegal activity. In conclusion, he
asserts that “the social center is dangerous for what it does.”*134*

A second PRC member distances himself somewhat from his colleague by
declaring that he is opposed to drug sales and purchase, but joins her in defending XM24,
saying that he often goes shopping at the weekly organic farmer’s market together with
his daughter. Though he is ostensibly opposing the strategic juxtaposition of youth social
center vs. old folks center, he effectively recreates the legitimate/illegitimate distinction

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*134* All dialogue represents quotations from the minutes of the meeting of the Navile neighborhood council,
dated October 25, 2005. These minutes are publically available and published online by the neighborhood
council at
by juxtaposing (illicit) drug consumption with (lawful, wholesome) shopping for local organic foods as a family. Several other council members from the center-left speak up to agree that, though there are drug problems in the neighborhood, XM24 is not responsible for them; furthermore, as several point out, the neighborhood and city administrations are already doing all they can to combat drugs, and they take issue with any implication to the contrary. In the end, the proposal is defeated by the majority, with votes split precisely between left and right parties. Looking at the minutes, it is clear that the character of XM24 was not the primary issue of disagreement between members. Rather, it essentially represented a reference point for organizing opposing ideological positions of what constitutes “urban blight” and “micro-criminality” and who/what is responsible for them. The politically right members sought to gain discursive authority by framing the social center as an element of blight and source of insecurity for the neighborhood and thus positioning themselves on the side of law and order. Their opponents, on the other hand, sought to defend the work of the neighborhood council, led by the center-Left, and oppose any efforts by the right parties to gain authority through security discourse. If this put them in symbolic opposition to a law and order discourse emphasizing central state power, so much the better – after all, the assertion of local authority and expertise could only help their position. Nonetheless, both sides observably used the conceptual logics of an “integrated prevention” approach to urban security to frame and debate the issue.

The second case took place in the summer of 2008, when a city council member representing the center-right party Alleanza Nazionale set up an informational tent on the
sidewalk in front of the entrance to XM24. Festooned with the green, white and red of the Italian flag, this stall dispensed flyers about the candidate’s run for city council and denounced the social center XM24 in harsh language. Though I was not able to secure a copy of the flyer myself, XM24 participants described it as full of references to “blight” (degrado), “rudeness” (maleducazione) and a “lack of hygiene” (scarsità d'igiene); XM24 participants were named balordo, a dated term which means both scatter-brained and crook. In response, XM24 participants called for an anti-fascist march against the candidate’s smear campaign. Activists from Bolognina and around the city responded to the call, gathering in front of the center with banners and amplified music to denounce the candidate’s hypocritical manipulation of the issue of urban security and lack of ties to the historically left-leaning, working class neighborhood; protester’s argued through a quickly produced megaphone that XM24 was no more than a chess piece in the candidate’s run for city council and he didn’t really care about the issues facing the neighborhood.

The noise and press of bodies drew significant local attention. Many passersby only walked on more quickly, but others, mainly older native-born Italians resident in the neighborhood, identified themselves as locals and proud anti-fascists and joined in throwing water and eggs at the Alleanza Nazionale tent. Given XM24 participants’ long history of collaborating with the local chapter of the National Association of Italian Partisans (ANPI) and organizing anti-fascist events, many residents who may under other circumstances have joined in criticizing the center’s noisy late-night concerts stood side by side with tattered, tattooed activists in opposing the non-local, fascist-sympathizing
position of elite privilege represented at that moment by Alleanza Nazionale. Even police personnel apparently felt the contingent value of this anti-fascist solidarity or at any rate hesitated to further provoke the crowd, as they did not effectively check protester’s actions against the Alleanza Nazionale tent. “For three hours we were exposed to thrown objects [lanci] and slogans without anyone raising a finger,” declared the city council candidate, adding that he was considering bringing a case against the state police division tasked with controlling public protests (Zic.it 2008).135

However, the conflict resurfaced later that fall when the same candidate, together with an Alleanza Nazionale member of the neighborhood council, distributed flyers throughout Bolognina calling for XM24 to be closed down. The flyer is titled “social center XM24: enough with this trash!!” and reads: “Once again the blight that runs rampant in Fioravanti street forces us to speak out. This serious situation, which has been exasperating the souls of residents, must stop immediately: legality, dignity and respect for inhabitants must be reestablished in the area.” It goes on to state that the area around XM24 is characterized by “an unhealthy air” dominated by “blight, filth, noise, anarchy and indecency” and in which “it is difficult to peacefully live and work.” In conclusion, a large contrasting heading asserts that “we will continue to defend the citizens/city residents.”

This instance of discourse clearly uses key urban security terms to represent CSOA participants as a threat to the peaceful conduct of daily life and the integrity

135 Specifically, the “General Investigations and Special Operations Division” (Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali, or DIGOS) who are in charge of combating terrorism and the subversion of democracy.
(cleanliness, proper use) of public spaces. Without specifying the exact nature of the illegalities involved, it represents social center activities as an affront to if not actual violation of the rule of law, which is itself implied to represent the essential foundation for the dignified and decent existence of residents. By not respecting laws and/or unwritten social codes outlining decent behavior and the decorous use of public space, CSOA participants are framed as disrespecting residents themselves, a construction that posits “local residents” as the defenders of a certain moral and social code that is under attack by these anarchistic young activists.

The opposition of CSOA participants and visitors vs. local residents suggests that CSOA users are somehow extraneous or foreign to the neighborhoods they hang out in. This position of being extraneous to or outside of local community is further developed through widespread discourse associating CSOA participants with immigrants and nomadic Rom people. Though some CSOA users are indeed immigrants, this association is not based on explicit references to migrant participants but rather is created through implication, by repeated discursive association. For instance, in 2010 several Bolognese politicians presented the city commissioner (a nationally appointed replacement for the mayor who stepped down at the beginning of his term) with a list of unresolved local problems she should address.136 This list, posted on the website of the political organization Destra Navile (Right Navile), identifies the “youth social center XM24” as the first problem of the Bolognina neighborhood but this is immediately followed by

136 As the commissioner was appointed by the central government, held by a center-Right coalition, one can imagine that Right-leaning local politicians saw her commissionership as an opportunity to institute measures that were not possible under Bologna’s usual center-left leadership.
“shops managed by foreigners that create problems of public order with fights and hygiene issues” on certain streets in the neighborhood; for other neighborhoods, the issues include “the presence of gypsies [zingari] devoted to robbery who drift around undisturbed between courtyards and shops...when the situation was reported to the neighborhood [administration] several months ago, the response was that one cannot intervene because these people are legal, an answer that is not convincing...” The list goes on to identify as unresolved security problems other groups of Rom who “cause disturbance and unease among the elderly and users of the park with arrogant behavior and perpetrate multiple purse snatchings” and another social center, Laboratorio Crash!, that is a source of “filth, people who urinate on the walls and in the street without shame, [and] drug and alcohol use” (Nanni 2010).137

These multiple representations of CSOA use the vocabulary generated by urban security policy to invoke the symbolic value of state power in staking out a political position: in favor of legality, the rule of law and ‘common decency’ and against illegality, indecency and the deterioration of dominant (if largely unwritten) cultural codes governing public behavior and uses of public space. In these discourses, there is a

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137The Italian reads: “centro sociale giovanile XM24: con musica ad alto volume la notte, uso ed abuso di alcolici e stupefacenti, sporczia e degrado, tormentano la vita ed il sonno dei residenti; via dall’Arca/via Ferrarese: negozi gestiti da stranieri creano problemi di ordine pubblico con risse, e mancanza di igiene (...)via Ferrarese/Parco Giudo Rossa e Limitrofe: si registra ormai da molto tempo la presenza di zingari dediti a furti, che gironzolano indisturbati tra cortili e negozi (...)Segnalata la situazione diversi mesi fa al Quartiere, è stato risposto che non si può intervenire in quanto queste persone risultano in regola; una risposta che non convince...(...) Parco Villa Torchi: gruppi di zingari arrecano disturbo e disagio ad anziani e frequentatori del parco, con fare arrogante e perpetrando diversi borseggiamenti;(...) Centro Sociale Giovaniile Crash: musica ad alto volume fino a notte fonda, sporczia, persone che orinano sui muri e per la strada senza pudore, allacciamenti abusivi alla corrente pubblica, consumo di alcol e stupefacenti.
repeated association of CSOA participants, immigrants and Rom people that frames these populations as a threat to security in part through their “foreignness” or divergence from an imagined homogenous cultural community.

In the case of the Alleanza Nazionale tent in Bolognina, the implicit project to pit elderly local inhabitants against young activists represented as ‘outsiders’ to the social fabric of the neighborhood seems to have failed in large part thanks to an alternative foundation for political solidarity in local anti-fascist history. Nonetheless, this framing of CSOA, Rom people and (extra-EU) immigrants as security threat by virtue of their extraneous of “foreign” character repeatedly resurfaces in contemporary Italian political discourse.

Written out of the national political community: CSOA as foreign

To further investigate the idea of CSOA users as extraneous or foreign, I turn to the spring 2011 contest for the mayorship of Milan, which was played out on the national stage through newspapers, radio talk shows, TV news reports and countless internet platforms. The position of mayor had been held since 2006 by Letizia Moratti, formerly Minster of Public Education under Berlusconi as a member of the center-right Casa delle Libertà (House of Freedoms) party. Her opponent in 2011 was Giuliano Pisapia, an outspoken proponent of civil liberties who had been elected to the Italian parliament as part of the far-left Democrazia Proletaria (Proletarian Democracy) party and later the Rifondazione Comunista party. This race was in the national spotlight because, like midterm elections in the USA, Italian regional and municipal elections occur in the middle of the parliamentary term and are taken as an indicator of future prospects for national politics. Furthermore, Milan has traditionally been a stronghold of the center-
right and a showroom for Berlusconi’s brand of economic development. Twelve different Right parties came together to support Moratti’s re-election, including Berlusconi’s Popolo della Libertà party and the Lega Nord. Berlusconi also personally vouched for Moratti and participated in her campaign, thus symbolically linking their electoral fates in the public eye.

What is interesting for my purposes here is the specific way that Pisapia’s opponents sought to de-legitimize his candidacy by associating him with an alarming coalition representing the extremist, ostensibly foreign interests of Rom people, fundamentalist Muslims and social center activists. This particular constellation (Rom, Muslims and CSOA) was invoked repeatedly throughout the spring in various ways, but especially after the first round of voting failed to establish a clear majority. In the Italian system, this situation results in a ballottaggio or second round run-off vote between the two highest-voted candidates. In the period leading up to these crucial run-off elections, Berlusconi held a nearly week-long media marathon with interviews on major TV stations and national radio shows and videos posted on YouTube. Rather than attacking Pisapia directly, he focused on the supposedly extremist and dangerously heterogeneous character of the candidate’s political allies, arguing that Pisapia was “close to the social centers” and ready to make Milan into “an Islamic city, a gypsyville full of Rom encampments and besieged by foreigners, who the left would give the right to vote” (SKY TG24 2011).米兰, he argued, represents a showcase of entrepreneurial spirit, and voters cannot let it become “disordered, chaotic and insecure” (disordinata, caotica e

138 “...una città islamica, una zingaropoli piena di campi rom e assediata dagli stranieri a cui la sinistra dà anche il diritto di voto.”
insicura) (SKY TG24 2011b) in the hands of this pro-immigrant, pro-CSOA candidate. He also explicitly appealed to local Milanese identity in the face of this ostensible foreign invasion, saying “I am convinced that many Milanese like myself were disturbed by the red flags of the social centers who celebrated the first [electoral] round in Milan” (La Repubblica 2011).  

The discourse of the Lega Nord from the period is similar, lacking only Berlusconi’s representations of Communists as a threat and focusing primarily on the specter of Rom and Muslim people taking over the city. On Radio Padania, the station associated with the Lega Nord, listeners called in express their criticisms of Berlusconi’s economic policies but argued that it was nonetheless important to oppose Pisapia and the foreign invasion he represented. As one caller urged, “let’s go vote for Moratti, otherwise besides the mosque we’re going to find ourselves with Rom and social centers right next door” (blitz quotidiano.it 2011). A television commercial aired by the Lega features two people sitting on a park bench, a young man and an older woman. In distinctly Milanese accents they discuss Pisapia’s proposals, starting with the construction of a complex for Muslim residents that could be a cultural center renowned throughout Europe. The blonde woman says, “so then Milano won’t be famous anymore for the Madonnina, but for mosques. Pisapia will really be a mayor for the foreigners.” The man notes that Pisapia has proposed making documented immigrants eligible for public jobs, to which the woman replies “for sure, because he is planning a multi-ethnic society, like

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139 “Sono convinto che tanti milanesi come me sono rimasti turbati dalle bandiere rosse dei centri sociali che hanno festeggiato il risultato del primo turno a Milano.”
140 “andiamo a votare la Moratti altrimenti oltre alla moschea ci troviamo i rom e i centri sociali sotto casa”
in Via Padova, where people knife each other and the Milanese can’t go out at night.***141 She continues, asking “but what will happen to security?” to which the man replied in heavily ironic tones, “no, but listen, for him insecurity is only a perception.”***142 The commercial ends with a few seconds of recorded Muslim prayer before a voice over urges people to get informed before they vote.

With only a few days to go before the run-off elections, strange happenings were observed in the city: supposed city workers taking measurements for “a new mosque for Pisapia” in well-trafficked public spaces around the city; young people dressed as Rom distributing promotional pamphlets and declaring their support for Pisapia, but with flyers that contain different content than the candidate’s official publications; and, on public buses and trams throughout the city, unkempt youth with dirty clothing and messy hair playing loud music on their portable stereos and pestering the other passengers, the stereotypical image of a social center user. When challenged, they reply “we’re for Pisapia!” and show off their bright orange bags, the signature color of Pisapia’s campaign (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2011). Though it was difficult to prove the guiding hand behind these instances of political street theater, the Pisapia election committee made a statement

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141 Via Padova is Milan’s most ethnically heterogeneous neighborhood, home to immigrants from a variety of countries of origin. There have been several highly publicized episodes of violence there in recent years, such as the 2010 knifing of a young Egyptian man, allegedly by several South American men (Corriere della Sera 2010).

142 “...quindi Milano non sarà più famosa per la Madonnina, ma per le moschee. Pisapia sarà proprio il sindaco degli stranieri (...)”Per forza, perché lui pensa ad una società multietnica. Come in via Padova, dove si accoltellano e i milanesi non possono uscire la sera (...) Ma la sicurezza, che fine farà? / No ma guarda, per lui la insicurezza e’ solo percepita...” The commercial is posted on YouTube at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eFV8CNWZEBw. The “Madonnina” is a golden statue of the Virgin Mary that adorns the Duomo cathedral in Milan’s central piazza.
to the Milan public prosecutor’s office accusing his opponents of false representation (ibid).

Berlusconi and the Lega Nord were hailing two different electorates with their anti-Pisapia campaigns: in Berlusconi’s case, a group of older, primarily middle or upper middle class native-born Italians, economically liberal yet culturally conservative, educated yet anti-cosmopolitan. In the case of the Lega Nord they are primarily working class Italians, spanning multiple generations, attached to social democratic economic principles but convinced that the kind of social cohesion and economic solidarity promised by a social democratic model depends on cultural or ethnic homogeneity to function. Where both these electorates appear to find common ground, however, is the idea that their everyday security is under attack; everyday security is here understood as social, economic and cultural stability or, as Bauman writes, a surety that “the world is steady and reliable, and so are its standards of propriety” (1999:17), the certainty that it is still possible to make crucial conceptual distinctions between right and wrong, good and bad, sensible and senseless, or us and them.

**Defining public space, delimiting the national community**

In the end, Pisapia won the second round election by 55%. The front page of the politically right *Il Giornale* newspaper the next day (May 31, 2011) featured a full color picture of a red Che Guevara flag waving in front of (but not quite covering) the arching white spires of the Duomo as Pisapia supporters celebrate their victory, a visual juxtaposition that once again represents the city’s meaningful spaces and national cultural symbols under attack by foreign elements who disrespect this heritage and want only to
displace it. The piazza of the Duomo here represents a staging ground not only for a specific mayoral race but also for larger cultural-political contestations over the ethnic, racial and political face of Italian society.

The heated character of this contestation – the keen anxiety, the physical and cultural insecurity and sense of economic disenfranchisement invoked by the anti-Pisapia campaign – helps shed light on the defensive exclusivity at the foundation of unwritten cultural-political codes governing how public space should be used and by whom. The oft-repeated constellation of Rom, Muslims and CSOA participants is suggestive in that all three populations share a position of threatening dominant ideas of who belongs where in contemporary Italian urban space, ideas of who symbolically “owns” public space and reserves the right to dictate its meaning. The culturally dominant population of older middle and working class native-born Italians, a population who came of age in a period of economic affluence and national confidence, see their traditional ownership threatened by deviant uses of public space, from collective Muslim prayer to disorderly, untidy public drinking and hanging out, from late night music that disturbs the peace to collective expressions of dissent and disrespect for public institutions.

Space, Henri Lefebvre reminds us, is never empty; it always embodies a meaning (1991: 154). Furthermore, as this meaning is generated through located and often conflicting acts of human creation, “the production of space is an inherently political project” (Fairbanks 2003: 132). By approaching the built environment of contemporary Italian cities as a complex social construction, as Lefebvre suggests, I seek to tease out the conflicting cultural-political projects that fuel these contests over the ownership and
meaning of space. In so doing, I seek to draw attention to the ways that cultural and political exclusion may be mapped onto the spatial landscape of the city through representations of legitimate and illegitimate uses of physical space. As Emanuela Guano shows in her richly ethnographic analysis of late 1990s Buenos Aires spatial conflicts (2004), contests over the meaning and ownership of urban space engage larger cultural and political conflicts between populations. In Buenos Aires, she argues, white middle class people threatened by the prospect of economic disenfranchisement sought to reinforce their own racially specific class identity by representing the mestizo lower class as barbaric and pre-modern invaders who threaten the city’s “civilized” character. White middle class residents generated “normative cartographies of ‘belonging’” that functioned to combine a sense of physical ownership of urban space with a stylized performance of group identity, thereby “establishing not only what belonged to whom, but also who belonged where, and who belonged nowhere” (71).

Through the term “civility,” urban security discourse in Italy invokes the flipside of “barbarity,” that is the attainment of civilization and a high level of culture. In Italy, “civility” (as a quality of urban space and the interactions that characterize it) embodies values that are historically divergent from the Argentine context but similarly ethnically and class-specific. The term maleducazione (rudeness), a common synonym of incivilità (incivility), expresses these values even more explicitly: etymologically maleducazione invokes both rudeness/bad or unseemly behavior and uncultured-ness, thus referencing both a specific code of good behavior and the sphere of middle-class respectability from which this code originates. Someone who is maleducato is either ignorant of the
unwritten rules of respectable middle-class Italian behavior in public spaces (because of a lack of “education” or acculturation, in the case of first-generation migrants) or is deliberately scorning these rules, refusing to grant them the dominance and authority they deserve (because of a generationally rebellious disrespect for tradition, in the case of youth, or an ethnically innate orientation to illegality, as is attributed to Rom people).

Through the diffuse discourses of urban security I have examined, the act of refusing the coercive social-cultural pressures enforcing respectable self-presentation and behavior is represented as an affront to the rules, but I wonder if it is not experienced by some Italians as an even more egregious affront to the generation and class who make it their job to represent, preserve and reproduce these rules in the face of bewildering and anxiety-producing change.

This policing of public space serves to also police who can act in public and how, thus also distinguishing between legitimate and illegitimate contributions to the common store of Italian culture. If the attribution of meaning to space (and the policing of that meaning) is an inherently political process, then efforts to exclude certain populations from this process are also efforts to exclude them from an important medium of cultural-political participation and engagement. I therefore read these struggles over the use of space as part of a larger project to draw the boundaries around legitimate national cultural community in such a way as to exclude certain populations and practices. If public space such as piazzas, parks and sidewalks are stages through which people participate in and contribute to the public sphere, then restricting or stigmatizing certain uses is tantamount to de-legitimizing certain actors and forms of participation in the national political
community, the collectivity that debates, disagrees and ostensibly decides the direction of the country through democratic processes.

“Buoni” vs. “cattivi”: delimiting legitimate participation

In the Navile neighborhood council debate described above, XM24 is contrasted with an old folks’ center; the unofficial, unregistered youth social center is accused of creating “problems of social order” while the officially registered center for the elderly is lauded for providing “important social and recreational activity.” This distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of political and cultural engagement is a common element in discussions of Italian CSOA as well as activism more broadly. Of course public officials do not use the terms “good” and bad”; activists, however, use the shorthand of buoni vs. cattivi to talk about the process through which authorities and media outlets distinguish between forms of political activism and engagement. For instance, peaceful, orderly protests that stick to their pre-authorized route are good, whereas loud, angry protests that result in broken windows or fresh graffiti are bad. Likewise certain CSOA in Bologna that willingly relocate when ordered to do so by the city administration are good whereas other CSOA that protest and fight the police sent to close them down are bad.

Having observed repeated instances of this distinguishing process during my fieldwork, I have come to the conclusion that but the distinction does not depend primarily on the specific positions that activists take. Rather, the distinction rests on how they go about expressing themselves and the activities they pursue; it is made,
furthermore, using the discursive frames provided by local policy on urban security and legality. “Bad” social center activity is thus anything disorderly or uncontrollable that violates the dominant norms governing public respectability and the use of public space. There distinctions are made not only between centers but between multiple activities in the same center: in relation to XM24, for example, critics have distinguished between the weekly farmer’s market, an example of legitimate cultural and political engagement, and loud punk concerts or sacrilegious art exhibits that are represented as illegitimate or negative instances of participation.

A “bad” example represents a non-standard use of space or phenomena that cannot integrated into the state or market. Indeed, spaces of unstructured (non-commercial, non-institutional) aggregation, such as parks, piazzas and CSOA, are among first sites targeted by urban security and legality campaigns. CSOA are targeted, I would argue, because they seek to displace the state through the creation of autonomous spaces, seeking a form of collective political and cultural engagement that does not fuel the political party system or work through institutional channels, one that is not and in some ways cannot be harnessed to state functions (and the associated reproduction of state authority and legitimacy) as are other elements of the third sector. If we consider this alongside the repeated measures to pacify or restrict the expression of political dissent through public protests, it is clear that representing CSOA as a source of “insecurity” and “urban blight” rather than legitimate political and civic sphere actors serves to draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate forms of political and civic engagement.
In other words, security discourse and policy in Bologna has generated discursive framings that shape the field of political engagement. By positioning specific phenomena (i.e. the activity of occupied, self-managed social centers) as a security threat, these discourses discipline not only, or not even primarily, the ostensible object of securitization (micro-criminality, urban blight, or CSOA) but observably shape larger ways of thinking about the political community and what may be done in it, what I have called political imaginaries. Specifically, these security discourses seek (with varying success) to construct a political imaginary in which CSOA are excluded from the sphere of legitimate political participation by framing them as elements of illegality and/or urban blight, or by excluding them from the imagined political and cultural community of the Italian nation. In so doing, they map contemporary cultural-political exclusions onto the physical space of the city and the figurative space of the public sphere, thus restricting the overall contours of Italian citizenship to exclude certain populations from legitimate political participation and cultural belonging.
CHAPTER 6

CONTESTING MODELS OF CITIZENSHIP IN ITALY

Opposing securitization processes and citizenship exclusions

What constitutes blight and insecurity? Contesting security discourses

The use of security terms and arguments to frame social center activity as a form of illegality and urban blight has become quite widespread, but it is certainly not uncontested. Here I look at several cases in Bologna to explore how social center participants contest these framings by attaching alternative referents to key terms such as “blight” and “security” used to frame debates about CSOA, thereby revealing the inherently political and ideologically specific character of security discourse.

When Alleanza Nazionale candidates distributed flyers around the Bolognina neighborhood in the fall of 2008 using criticisms of XM24 to gain visibility for their electoral campaigns, social center participants responded with a flyer of their own. In this text, they respond to accusations that XM24 represents a source of blight by accusing the candidates of themselves representing “blight, filth and moral and political indecency” due to their alliances with organized crime and the violent and fascistic orientation of their political practices, citing for example recent attacks against headquarters of the far-left CGIL union traced to young Alleanza Nazionale members. In an effort to redefine what counts as micro-criminality and illegality, they refer to drug use and dealing among
politicians, such as the unregulated and unpunished use of cocaine among members of parliament and the way Italian right parties depend on the support of large alcohol-producing corporations. XM24 participants seek thereby to redefine “blight,” in this case to indicate the moral and ethical deterioration of the political class at the national level rather than late night noise, trash and disorderly behavior in the local context.

In addition to responding to public discourse against them, social center participants also contest security framings through their own regularly scheduled or proactive initiatives. For instance, in the spring of 2009 the center collectivity developed the idea of clearing out a portion of the ‘no man’s land’ behind the center to make a sports field for neighborhood kids. One cold morning in April, participants gathered and put on white biohazard suits and latex gloves to go out and collect the used syringes, glass vials and other dangerous waste that littered the area, depositing it in biohazard containers. As part of an ongoing campaign to reform drug law and policy, white-suited activists then publically delivered these containers to Bologna’s new city hall complex.

The action was accompanied by an open letter to the city that denounced the mayor’s repressive approach to drug problems in the city, conducted in the name of combating “insecurity” and “urban blight.” Cities throughout Europe have established model harm-reduction programs, activists argue in their letter, but in Bologna the administration prioritizes investments in police forces and surveillance technology, obscuring or shifting the problem from one neighborhood to another rather than effectively addressing it. They address the mayor as the legally accountable director of public health in the city, accusing him of having “culpably let this space [behind XM24]
become blighted” (*degradare*) by closing it off from social services outreach workers, thus contributing to “environmental desert-ification and degradation of human dignity.” In this text “urban blight” references not drug use but rather the abandonment of land and segments of the population in the name of political expediency and economic profit. “Let it be clear,” the letter reads, “that this does not intend in any way to be the umpteenth shameful media campaign against ‘the drug addict’ or immigrant dealer carried out by the fascist Right for solely electoral reasons, this is the assumption of responsibility by a social space like XM24 to give life and sociality back to a space [that has been] ever more dangerous and unusable” thanks to “the frantic construction sector speculation of the last few years.” In this frame, unauthorized occupation by activists and neighborhood children represents a valid and valuable use of public space, returning “life and sociality” to the area. Furthermore, by explicitly identifying construction-sector activity as the underlying cause, this argument seeks to shift the issue of urban blight from the sphere of security to the sphere of political economy. As a matter of security, the question of abandoned space appears technical and opaque, something that the state must address on behalf of residents through professional, technical tools such as fences and police patrols. As a matter of political economy, the issue becomes debatable and

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143 “La nostra vuole anche essere una denuncia pubblica del sindaco come primo responsabile legale della salute pubblica nel territorio comunale per aver colpevolmente lasciato degradare questo spazio (...) [la] desertificazione ambientale e del degrado della dignità umana...”

144 “(...) Sia chiaro che questa non vuole essere in nessun modo l’ennesima vergognosa campagna mediatica contro il "tossico" o l’immigrato spacciatore portata avanti dalla destra fascista e razzista unicamente per motivi elettorali, questa è un'assunzione di responsabilità da parte di uno spazio sociale come XM24 per ridare vita e socialità ad un luogo sempre più pericoloso e impraticabile(...)...che non sono altro che i frutti della speculazione edilizia esasperata di questi ultimi anni.”
ideologically specific, something that might reasonably be addressed through participatory, democratic channels.

One last example clearly illustrates this dual strategy of re-signifying “urban blight” on one hand while on the other hand reformulating the definition of “security” itself. Piazza Verdi in Bologna’s university neighborhood is a popular location for public protests, live music and hanging out late at night. For the last decade or so it has been targeted by urban security policy aimed at bringing these deviant uses of space under control to the satisfaction of (chiefly elderly, native Italian) homeowners in the neighborhood. In the name of combating urban blight, Piazza Verdi has become the stage for gestures of state power, including rows of police vehicles occupying the square, countless surveillance cameras, armed patrols and, since Cofferati’s legality campaign created new offenses, the ticketing of young offenders for the crime of sitting on the ground or eating and drinking outside of designated areas. Alongside these measures, the city administration has effectively removed large sections of the piazza from public use by leasing them to commercial entities such as nearby bars, to set up outdoor customer seating, or advertising firms, to set up tents and tables promoting everything from internet service to take-out food delivery.

In early 2011, several Bologna-based collectives associated with local CSOA organized an event to protest the encroachment of repressive security measures on the space of Piazza Verdi. The day-long festival revolved around actively using the piazza, with a social lunch, debates, music and interactive visual and performance art. Aping the language of security regulations, participants were encouraged to enact illicit activities,
from “consuming foodstuffs and beverages in public places” to “approaching moving vehicles with the intention of asking for handouts or offering services such as the cleaning or washing of windows or other parts of the vehicle,” from “enacting traveling theatrical activity in areas not allotted for such uses” to “displaying or selling creative intellectual work in areas not expressly identified [for such purposes].”145 Through this event, organizers sought to assert an alternative meaning for the concept of security, from a state of exclusion or immobility characterized by privatization, spatial restrictions and surveillance to a state of liberated, heterogeneous collective discussion and activity. Contesting the idea that legal-penal measures are the only or best route to peaceful cohabitation, organizers and participants enacted the idea that what is really needed to keep people safe is horizontal social bonds, which are best produced by collective activity involving diverse social actors in a space of unstructured possibility.

“All of us were behind that shield”: contesting legality through politicization

Legal discourse and processes tend to both individualize and de-politicize. Especially in the liberal tradition of political philosophy, the rights-bearing subject in legal processes is, with few and tortuous exceptions, the individual. Indeed, as Will Kymlicka reminds us in his exploration of the place collective rights might hold in a liberal democratic system, “liberal democracy emerged in part as a reaction against the way that feudalism defined individuals’ political rights and economic opportunities by

145 “...ostacolare la circolazione pedonale; consumare alimenti e bevande in luoghi pubblici; (...) avvicinarci ai veicoli in circolazione al fine di chiedere l’elemosina o offrire servizi quali la pulizia o il lavaggio di vetri o fari o altre parti del veicolo; esercitare attività di spettacolo viaggiante su aree non concesse a tale scopo; esporre o vendere opere dell’ingegno a carattere creativo in aree non appositamente individuate.” Press release signed by “Individui e collettività degradati dalle ordinanze” (individuals and collectives degraded by the regulations).
their group membership” (1995:34). In the effort to free individuals from the bounds of
group-based identities and associated hierarchies, then, liberal political philosophy
conceptualizes the individual as the basic unit of political life and legal processes.

At the same time, the operational conceptualization of legal processes is generally
positivistic in that it treats the law as an unambiguous system of rules in which the line
between legal and illegal is clear and definitive, arising from an underlying (coherent,
unambiguous) formal structure. The validity or effective authority of law is thus
inextricably bound up with the authority and legitimacy of the state that comprises this
formal structure. Moreover, processes of reifying law so that it appears “definitive,
unimpeachable and logical” (Heyman and Smart 1999:11) are part and parcel of
processes of representing and reifying the state so that it appears coherent, rational and
authoritative. This representation of law as coherent and rational even in its
implementation therefore depends on a process of de-politicization, a process of
conceptually distancing law from its manipulation by interested humans and its
contingent operation in real, messy daily life; this de-politicization serves to obscure the
“material force of law, its instrumentality, its historicity, [and] its productivity of some of
the most meaningful and salient parameters of sociopolitical life” (De Genova 2002: 432).

In statutory systems such as the Italian one, where codified, written law is set
down by the legislature, the ostensible rationality of legal processes depends on their
appearing to be distanced and insulated from the partisan interests embodied in political
processes. The operation of law is thus represented as a purely technical process, in
which legal professionals “limit themselves to applying mechanically the provisions of
the law” (Caianiello 2010:3) that the legislature has set out. In theory, then, legal actors such as judges and prosecutors “simply carry out a technical activity from which political considerations are excluded” (ibid). Even as it exercises its exclusive powers of initiating criminal proceedings, filing indictments and formulating charges against the accused (ibid: 3-4), the Italian public prosecutor’s office, as part of the judiciary, is covered by this symbolic umbrella of neutrality in which choices and actions it carries out are officially or ostensibly technical and cannot be affected through any collective deliberative process.

In the realm of political protest and CSOA activity, however, participants often seek to lift the veil of technical neutrality covering the operation of law in order to reveal (and contest) its historically situated and politically interested character. I have observed repeated examples of this, leading me to argue that the politicization of legal processes is a primary strategy of CSOA participants in relation to the state’s organs of authority such as local administrators, the police and the judiciary. CSOA participants seek to contest the linked forces of individualization and de-politicization that are operationalized through legal processes by using collective actions and discourses of solidarity to ‘massify’ or collectivize interactions with authorities while at the same time (re)politicizing these interactions through public discourse about the political interests and historical processes they enact.

One example of this strategy took place in 2009 and 2010, following an action (called *operazione rewind* or “operation rewind”) in which the Turin prosecutor’s office identified 21 individuals who had participated in trying to force the police line
demarcating the “red zone” of exclusion surrounding the meeting site of the G8 University Summit, held in Turin May 2009. This judicial operation functioned to single specific individuals out of the crowd of protesters based on video footage gathered by DIGOS (Gulotta 2009), the “General Investigations and Special Operations Division” of state police tasked with combating terrorism and the subversion of democracy, primarily by keeping tabs on public protest. The accused activists were represented through both media coverage and legal processes as violators of the rules of “good” (orderly, peaceful) protest: according to newspaper coverage of the operation, DIGOS footage showed the identified protesters armed with sticks and safety flares and disguised with helmets and scarves, “standing two steps ahead of the other gathered protesters [in] a ‘tortoise’ formation, under plastic shields reinforced with armor” before “flinging themselves against the [police] barricade” (Gulotta 2009). The identified individuals were brought to trial on various charges, including (enacting) bodily harm, violence and threatening public officials (Cori 2009).

It was the loose grouping of CSOA participants and student collectives, collectively known as the Onda Anomala (Tidal Wave), that organized the Turin counter-summit and protests as part of their ongoing opposition to educational reforms and funding cuts initiated in 2008. Following the arrests, the Onda organized a series of public protests and press conferences denouncing the “operation rewind” legal action. In Bologna, one of the main marches was led by a huge banner declaring that “dietro quello

146 Sì proteggono con caschi e sciarpe, uno ha in tasca un fumogeno, gli altri stringono un bastone stanno a due passi dagli altri manifestanti raccolti a “testuggine,” sotto gli scudi di plastica rinforzati da un’armatura, che poi si scagliano contro il cordone.
scudo c’eravamo tutti/e”: all of us were behind that shield. Speaking as a group, activists attacked “operation rewind” by contesting the fact that it targeted specific individuals and by highlighting its politically interested character. In opposition to media representations that distinguished between “good” peaceful and “bad” violent protesters, they asserted the collective character of the actions: “The decision to violate the red zone was made by a national assembly two days before the march” explained representatives of the Onda. It is natural that not every individual implement every part of a collective decision, they argued, but that does not mean that individuals were acting on their own (La Repubblica 2009b).  

This argument emphasizes how legal structures with the individual as their object come into conflict with collective decision-making processes and expressions of dissent. In this argument, the collective nature of the decision, the fact that it came out of the hallowed consensus process, means that the actions of those few individuals at the front lines represented not individual choice so much as a collective will and agenda.

Furthermore, activists asserted the political nature of the legal-penal action “operation rewind.” First they pointed out the timing of the arrests, only a week before the protests and counter-summit planned for 35th G8 summit in l’Aquila, Abruzzo, on July 8–10, 2009. Given this timing, they argued, the arrests represented not a disinterested process of upholding the rule of law so much as a politically interested effort to undermine or repress the mass protest movement of which the accused individuals were part (La Repubblica 2009b). By asserting the specific political aim of

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147 La decisione di violare la zona rossa è stata concordata da un’ assemblea livello nazionale due giorni prima del corteo... (...) É evidente che in queste situazioni non tutti fanno tutto, qualcuno va avanti e altri restano indietro, ma questo non vuol dire che una parte della manifestazione non abbia condiviso l’accaduto.
repressing dissent, activists implicitly questioned the very validity and authority of the legal-penal actions brought against some of them: if the legal processes in question were used as ideologically motivated tools of political control, they no longer enjoyed the aura of technical rationality and inevitability granted by de-politicization.

This strategy of contesting legality through collectivization and politicization can be seen in many aspects of CSOA practice, perhaps most explicitly in the acephelous form adopted by CSOA participants for their decision-making processes. For instance, in the spring of 2009 the national supermarket chain Cooperativa di Consumatori (Consumer’s Cooperative or Coop for short) initiated a lawsuit against the XM24-based collective Coordinamento Migranti di Bologna (the Bologna group of national network Migrant Coordination) for the group’s campaign denouncing the way Coop treated its migrant workers. An active participant of Bologna Migrant Coordination came to a general XM24 meeting to inform center users not to accept receipt of the suit if someone tried to deliver it there. As he explained, the lawsuit had been initiated but never officially “verified” because the authors of the legal action did not know who to address it to. It had therefore been sent but never officially delivered, in that no individual had stepped forward to acknowledge its receipt. Indeed, the group’s collective position was that they had no leader or representative and so there was no one to collect it. Like most CSOA collectives, Bologna Migrant Coordination is not registered as an association, so there is no official record of the group’s membership or hierarchy and no legally effective way to hold specific individuals accountable for the group. Furthermore, it was their practice to deliberately avoid the legal identification of group members by asking for
protest permission under the auspices of another allied group already officially registered with the authorities. In the case of the libel lawsuit, when the legal action could not be addressed to any particular individual, it was deflected into a procedural void; the fact that it could not reach or affect its intended target effectively nullified its operation. Coming up against a baffling wall of non-hierarchical collective-ness, the legal instrument based on individual political-legal subjectivity could go no further.

By refusing to form an official association and undergo the associated processes of institutionalization, CSOA participants work to deflect existing legal tools by refusing to present a “head” or individual subject that could act as the recipient of legal processes. I also observed, moreover, that even when CSOA participants do form official associations they often seek to assert the “mass” or collective character of their activity in the face of individualizing legal processes. As I followed the development of Bartleby Spazio Occupato, I noted that a significant amount of participants time and energy was devoted to expanding consensus around the value and meaning of the center, to making the center as collective and “popular” as possible in both response to and anticipation of legal-penal actions against them.

When activists moved to re-occupy their chosen building, they did so at the head of a raucous march involving hundreds of students with banners and bullhorns. The mass action was filmed and immediately posted to YouTube for public dissemination. Though breaking the lock of the property owner (the University of Bologna, in this case) is an illegal act punishable by law, it was carried out publically and collectively, with the three or four individuals actually wielding the rotary cutters shielded both visually and
politically by the throng of protesters surrounding them. After reopening in April of 2009, Bartleby activists put up posters and handed out flyers to raise public awareness about their project; they also held countless events involving a variety of actors in the local arts and intellectual scenes. As intended, this increased public awareness discouraged the university from sending the police to publically close the center a second time. As one participant explained to me, “by that time, lots of people, artists, musicians, authors et cetera, had come to participate and use it [the Bartleby space]. We had created consensus and legitimacy. They had spoken up in support of what we were doing.” The university, she explained, wanted to avoid a second public closure (sgombero) “that would make them look bad, like the aggressors against something supported by people in the city.” Instead, administrators informed Bartleby participants that the building required work, and quietly changed the locks while activists were away participating in the national protests in Turin.

Bartleby activists decided that what they needed was more widespread support and participation to gain leverage in their negotiations with the university, so they held a series of public meetings to develop a shared agenda for the space that reflected the views and interests of a more diffuse group of interested people. At one of these meetings, a male student expressed the collective aims of the project:

We [Bartleby participants] felt urgency to open a space, because for the last five years in Bologna the spaces have just been closing, disappearing (…) and the university has already showed an allergy to non-legitimate collectivities. If you’re an association, fine, but if you’re a social space than you can go to hell. We need to defend, and our defense is primarily discursive and productive – the new rector is talking about excellence, innovation, prestige – we need to show him that we do this, that we produce, innovate, give space to new and valuable projects. We want
to break with the discourse where you’re either legal or you’re illegal. There are plenty of legal projects that take university money and don’t do anything useful for anyone. We want to show that we can build new norms cutting through/across legality.

Rather than legality, he argued, their project should be judged on merit; in order to make that happen, organizers recognized that they needed a wide base of public support: in other words, they needed to make their activity and aims as collective as possible.

At a subsequent meeting, participants discussed the possibility of forming an association. Although participants wanted to remain autonomous, they acknowledged that the association form “can be an instrument that allows certain processes – without one you can’t enter into certain flows of funds, relationships, things like that.” One of the founding participants, Elena, explained to me in an interview that forming an association was a pragmatic decision; they were not ideologically opposed to the idea, but did hope to retain their anti-institutional character despite the new form:

We’ve never been ideological. We don’t occupy to be the most radical or because we hate the rector, but because we have these projects that need space. If they give us a space that meets our needs, we would welcome it. If we need to negotiate, we will – but not by compromising our projects. The association could be a tool. The university has said, we won’t deal with you because you’re not a known association…this way we can say, ‘Yes we’re an association, but we’re also the group that’s occupying’

Elena asserts that, association or not, they are still “the group that’s occupying,” that is, a collective entity pursuing political aims through illegal means. They cannot be held to the individualizing legal regulations of an institutional organization, she implies; they demand to be addressed as a collective political project.
A few months later, after another re-occupation and a tireless publicity campaign, the university administration offered the activists another building, one further away from the core of the university neighborhood but still in the city center, and large enough to host parties, concerts and other public events. The activists agreed, and still inhabit the new space as of this writing, October 2011. Since moving out of the occupied center into a space granted through a legal agreement, the center styles itself Bartleby spazio autogestito (self-managed space) instead of Bartleby spazio occupato (occupied space). However, as several participants agreed in separate interviews, the important thing for Bartleby is not their (il)legal status per se, but their commitment to remaining autonomous from institutional and mass party structures so that their projects continue to draw a wide variety of participants and embody a critique from outside “the system.” Though they did form an association, they continue to communicate and negotiate through “mass” and traditionally political channels of public marches, sit-ins and unauthorized posters, thus presenting a collective, political face that cannot easily be addressed with individualizing, technical legal tools.

As Nicholas De Genova argues in his review of anthropological literature on migrant illegality, one of the functions of law is to delimit “the parameters of its own operations” (2002: 424). The field of law’s operation not only draws lines between what is legal and illegal but more broadly delimits what is the proper object of law and what rightly falls outside its purview. Of course, as De Genova reminds us, this ostensibly technical process is “not without manifold ambiguities and indeterminacies, always manipulable in practice” and conducted “with a considerable degree of calculated
deliberation” (ibid). In other words, the process of defining what does and does not fall under the purview of law is itself a political process, embodying multiple divergent interests and producing manifestly political effects.

In their efforts to collectivize or “massify” their struggles, CSOA participants thus engage in a political struggle over how specific issues will be framed and addressed: will the illegal actions of activists be framed as a matter of individual criminality and therefore addressed through the technical, codified process of a courtroom trial between the individual and the state, or will their actions be framed as the expression of a larger collective agenda expressing underlying socio-political conflict generated by historical forces, and thus be addressed through public debate over the priorities and choices shaping Italian economic and social policy? Much of CSOA activity could be seen as simply illegal, but if we approach the boundaries of legal vs. illegal as both contingent and politically produced, we see that CSOA participants not only violate specific laws but more fundamentally work to contest the rule of law and specifically its operation of distinguishing the purely legal from the messily political.

**Who belongs and how so? Contesting exclusions of belonging and participation**

While the Italian state has remained largely silent on social questions in recent years, it has enacted ethnically exclusive models of belonging in the imagined community of the Italian nation through security policy and legislation.\(^{148}\) The security

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\(^{148}\) I read these models as *ethnically* exclusive in that they use markers of language, religion and essentialist cultural difference to define who does and does not belong in the territory and national body of the Italian state. Of course racialized biological difference is certainly invoked by Italian citizenship law that prioritizes membership through descent (in that in that resident migrants face daunting restrictions while non-resident Italians are allowed to both re-apply for citizenship themselves and pass it on to their children) (Andall 2002), and dark skin continues to represent a marked trait, used to represent the cultural difference
package of 2009, representing immigrants as a threat to law and order in Italy, erected multiple barriers between migrants from outside the EU and any substantive form of belonging or participation in Italian society. From proposed measures that would have required health professionals to report undocumented patients to state agencies to actual measures that make documented status a requirement for using numerous state agencies, non-citizens are discouraged or prevented from accessing many state-provided services; at the same time, measures hampering naturalization through long-term residence, citizenship acquisition through marriage and familial re-unification effectively reinforce the wall between immigrants and Italian citizenship.

Some Italian mayors have proposed extending local voting rights to documented immigrants, but the central state appears to be moving in the opposite direction, using security legislation to create penal measures for selective use against non-citizens and extending spaces of exception” such as migrant detention centers through which individuals are stripped of legal rights and protections, detained in a state of segregation and prepared for expulsion from Italian territory. Even second-generation Italians who do hold Italian citizenship may be effectively excluded or ambiguously included by virtue of their ethnically and racially marked social locations. Jacqueline Andall (2002) finds that the children of Africans who migrated to Italy perceive the imagined Italian national body to have an ethnically and racially specific character; these perceptions often spring of and justify the differential treatment of both immigrants and Italians from southern areas (Schneider 1998, Angel-Ajani 200, 2002). Nonetheless, in the recent political discourse I’ve reviewed, the most salient differences used to justify differential rights and policies appear to be classically ethnic ones, including, as I have described, religion, language and cultural difference understood in an essentialist way that precludes any real possibilities for integration.
from interactions with representatives of the state and especially through police harassment and racial profiling conducted in the name of security. This process of exclusion through securitization works to shape both the experiences and self-concept of migrants and native Italians both: as Donald Carter argues (1997), it is in part through the exclusion of migrant Others that dominant notions of the Italian state are formed.

Though my white skin, northern European features and American passport effectively exempt me from random identity checks by police, I have extensive experience with the bureaucratic face of immigration control. At the *questura*, the local outpost of the state police in Bologna, I have arrived at 6:30 a.m. or earlier to line up in front of the tall metal gates, waiting to get a number when the office opens at 8:30. Armed state police officers herd people into the courtyard, handing out numbers but unable to provide any useful information; they are present only to watch and control the crowd. Inside the cramped and sectioned-off room there are a few chairs and a great deal of confusion, with people asking each other questions in a cacophony of languages and broken Italian and peering at the handwritten signs, created by office workers, that explain the online procedure for tracking permit requests. Desperate throngs push against the rope barriers, trying to flag down passing workers to ask for information: How do I know when my permit is ready? My boss pays me in cash, how can I demonstrate the employment prerequisite required for a permit of stay? One by one, individuals are allowed to enter a long hallway and stand before one of the clear plastic barriers; all communication between immigrants and service workers takes place through tiny microphones and speakers.
Across the thick plastic, questura workers are almost always polite and kind, doing their best to help each individual, but their job is made difficult by the maze of bureaucratic red tape (much of it introduced through recent security legislation) that stands between most migrants and the possibility of stable, legal sojourn in Italy, not to mention more substantive inclusion or integration. On one of my numerous visits to the immigration authorities I stood comparing notes with a young Algerian man living studying engineering at the University of Bologna, and he wondered aloud if the entire daunting process was not deliberately designed to discourage permit applications. “It’s so difficult to stay legal” he observed in Italian, “I think they want me to slip into illegality [cadere in illegalità] so they can send me home!” Deliberate or not, you quickly realize that any inroads you do manage to make are on the sufferance of the state, not an entitlement to be taken for granted.

Medical professionals have demonstrated their unwillingness to enforce rules requiring that they report undocumented migrants seeking their services, but the lengthy, highly publicized parliamentary debate about this provision and the regulations ultimately included in the 2009 security legislation have created a climate of fear and avoidance among migrants in relation to state services (Femminis 2010: 1). State and voluntary sector service providers have reported a sharp decrease in the rate of service use by migrants, both documented and non (ibid:2). This suggests not only a fear of discovery but a widespread perception that these services are not open to migrants regardless of their legal status because there are additional, unwritten but affective cultural and ethnic bases of exclusion operating alongside codified legal restrictions.
Accessing the migration legal aid and advice service at the social center TPO is a completely different experience. Whereas the questura offices are guarded by armed officers, TPOs offices are tucked away within the social center buildings, cleaner and newer than most CSOA thanks to a signed agreement with the city, but still festooned with protest banners alongside large murals and handwritten signs. The TPO office is open on a drop-in basis, in the evenings and weekends to accommodate people’s work schedules. When I visited seeking advice, I was welcomed by a young woman studying law at the University of Bologna and encouraged to sit beside her so I could see the computer monitor for myself. I described my case and the issues I was having; she gave me a political-economic analysis of the intricacies and ambiguities of current immigration law and offered strategies for creative maneuvering within the system. Legality was not her primary concern; rather, she focused on how to meet my needs with the tools available, both within and outside of the legal system. The purpose of the office, she explained, is not only to help individual cases but to educate migrants so they can exercise the rights they do hold and gain leverage in dealing with the system.

Giving space to migrants and agitating for migrant rights has been a central focus of CSOA activity since the 1980s, and the legal aid office at TPO is currently one of a constellation of services for immigrants at CSOA in Bologna and throughout the country. Many CSOA host free schools, staffed by volunteers, offering Italian as a second language and legal advocacy drop-in centers; some centers, such as XM24, have also established free medical clinics open to all on a drop-in basis. Some projects, such as Coordinamento Migranti (Migrant Coordination), are explicitly political vehicles through
which immigrants and native Italians work together to oppose the securitization of migration in both its symbolic and material dimensions through media campaigns and direct action. During my fieldwork period, for instance, Migrant Coordination participants carried out a campaign to mobilize social service professionals in opposing the proposed provisions of the 2009 security package. They organized a day-long strike of migrant workers to raise awareness about the security legislation and the place of migrants in Italian society more broadly; they also campaigned against the local supermarket chain Coop to denounce the company’s treatment of its migrant workers, who are rendered vulnerable to super-exploitation given that an employment contract is a requirement for obtaining and maintaining legal status.

What these myriad projects have in common is a will to level the playing field of democratic political and cultural participation in Italy. This is pursued through the socio-economic and political empowerment of migrants, both in the labor market and in relation to the Italian state. To this end, native Italian participants deliberately ‘step back’ to make room for migrants by organizing relations within the groups so that native Italian origins, language skills and citizenship status are not prerequisites for leading decision-making processes. In Migrant Coordination, which is composed of roughly two thirds first generation migrants of mixed legal and citizenship statuses and one third native Italians, proposals are most often brought forward by the migrant participants and meetings are dominated by these actors; as the Migrant Coordination homepage declares, the group is for “il protagonismo dei e delle migrant” (the protagonism of male and female migrants), in which “protagonism” refers to taking a leading role, being the agent
of the action in question. Beyond solidarity or advocacy, these groups seek to overturn dominant power relations, at least within the autonomous space of the social center and associated public actions, so that migrants can exercise their own agency in struggling for political rights and cultural belonging.

This assertion of migrant rights and entitlements can also be seen as part of the larger CSOA project of valorizing diversity in all its manifestations. Given their understanding of anti-fascism as the valorization of difference in the face of coercive homogeny, CSOA participants seek more broadly to dismantle and symbolically evacuate all the everyday cultural norms and practices that reproduce dominant power relations by stigmatizing difference. An anti-fascist world, they argue, can only be built beginning from the subjects most oppressed by the authoritarian political structures, exploitative economic relations and repressive morality characteristic of contemporary life. To this end, CSOA participants also contest media and political representations of migrants, drug users, Rom, GLBT individuals and young people of all kinds as dangerously deviant or criminal populations who represent a threat to the safety and integrity of the Italian nation, whether as a result of their ostensibly irreconcilable cultural difference or their refusal to conform to dominant standards of behavior. The cultural and political contributions of these subjects (and everyone else) should be welcomed and valued as part of the common store, they argue. Participants thus seek to create a more inclusive sphere of collective engagement by dismantling the cultural and political structures they perceive as hampering the self-realization and associated substantive participation of such subjects, and by extension of all individuals.
Conclusion: from delimiting belonging through dominant citizenship to enabling participation through cultural citizenship

Citizenship, ideally, is the vehicle through which people participate in the national political community; that is, citizenship ostensibly guarantees individuals’ access to the channels through which they can take part in collective decision-making processes. The wealth of ethnographic data on the everyday operation of citizenship, however, shows that formal, legal citizenship is rarely sufficient to guarantee the kind of substantive membership and inclusion that enables individuals to make their voices heard in the myriad of everyday, informal knowledge-producing and decision-making processes that generate the real texture, prospects and limits of lived experience. This is because formal citizenship does not always (and perhaps not often) correspond to substantive belonging. If we look beyond formal citizenship status to consider citizenship as the state of culturally, socially and symbolically belonging to a given collectivity, we find that dominant citizenship models are built through and thus embody normative notions of class, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity that serve, in effect, to exclude groups marked by whatever forms of difference have been made to matter in a given context.

The idea that some trait-bearing populations are marked and excluded from collective spheres is obviously not new. What the lens of citizenship helps us see, I would argue, is that participation and belonging are linked in such a way that exclusive notions of who belongs in the collectivity also function to delimit and restrict participation. Exclusive notions of who substantially belongs to the national body restrict participation
in the public sphere of the nation by devaluing and co-opting the contributions that racial or ethnic minorities make to common processes of everyday meaning-making and cultural production through mass media (Page 1999), by policing (through racial or civilizational frames) who belongs where and who gets to define the character of common space (Guano 2004) as well as “respectable” standards of public behavior and self-presentation (Guano 2006, 2007), and by stigmatizing or marginalizing non-dominant language use in the public sphere (Urciuoli 1996, Urla 1995). Citizenship models thereby function to define how people may legitimately participate, with the result that non-complying modes of engagement, public self-presentation or cultural expression are denied legitimacy and value. As political philosopher Iris Marion Young argues, the reality of culturally plural states is that, where some “capacities, culture, values, and behavioral styles” are privileged over others, processes that depend on public participation work to advantage majority concerns over the concerns of disadvantaged groups (1998: 265). Indeed, in the Piazza Maggiore soapbox scene I described when introducing this dissertation, multiple forms of difference and perceived insufficiency came together to discourage the young Cuban man in front of me from expressing his political ideas in a context that was ostensibly free and open to all.

At the same time, the linkage of belonging and participation also works in the other direction, in that excluding certain populations from the means of substantive participation also shapes their experiences of and prospects for belonging. As Andall (2002) finds in relation to Italy, when the children of African migrants are effectively excluded from job opportunities or singled out by police for harassment, their sense of
belonging in the Italian nation is attenuated; furthermore, as Davide Però (2007) shows in his description of the “Forum” set up by center-left politicians in Bologna in the 1990s to include immigrants in collective decision making processes, even deliberate efforts to facilitate the participation of marginalized actors through existing political structures may be rendered ineffective by the unexamined dominant logics underpinning conventional channels of political engagement. Much of what sociologists measure to judge the relative ‘integration’ of migrant populations in the host national community, markers such as voting, position in the job market and intermarriage, can also be understood as routes or forms of participation: participation in democratic processes, in the common activities of production, in social institutions such as marriage and procreation. Exclusion from real participation in these areas thus affects not only earnings or socio-economic status, it also implies roadblocks on the road to substantive membership, both experienced and ascribed.

This relationship between participation and belonging is especially clear in the case of heteronormative exclusions. Building on feminist analyses of the exclusionary foundations of dominant citizenship models (Fraser 1997, Fraser and Gordon 1998, Young 1998, Lister 2002), queer studies scholars argue that sexuality has been central to the exclusivity of normative citizenship models. Beginning from the idea of national belonging as a kind of symbolic kinship and mutual desire for intimacy and fidelity, Siobhan Somerville (2005) examines the history of the state's production of citizens through naturalization in the United States. Naturalization, in contrast to producing citizenship through sexual reproduction, is an ostensibly voluntary (contractual) process.
which therefore potentially detaches political belonging from (hetero)sexual reproduction; however, Somerville finds that it has historically been constructed on a foundation of heteronormative assumptions about the (potential and actual) national body. “The very language of naturalization,” she argues, “has historically been encumbered with assumptions about a heterosexual, reproductive subject, and so tends to reinforce the model of an organic, sexually reproduced citizenry” (664). In her historical investigation of the relationship between marriage and citizenship in the US, Amy L. Brandzel likewise finds that marriage has functioned to enforce heteronormative limits on the state’s citizenry. The state, she argues, has consistently made marriage a necessary element of upstanding citizenship; at the same time, however, certain citizens have been prevented from participating in the institution of marriage. The result is a divided or delimited citizenry, with full belonging granted only to those permitted to participate in marriage, and queer (as well as inter-racial) couples thereby excluded from the imagined community of the nation. The point that emerges from these studies is that a system that prioritizes and naturalizes heteronormative institutions such as marriage and (hetero)sexual reproduction as channels of participation central to citizenship thereby works to exclude queer subjects from the forms of belonging, of symbolic kinship, that follow from these channels of participation.

**Cultural citizenship, CSOA-style**

The everyday practices of participants at heterogeneous, non-identitarian CSOA such as XM24 and Bartleby can be seen as a challenge to both the boundaries of belonging and conventional definitions of democratic political participation, as well as
the way that these two dimensions (belonging and participation) mutually interact to fuel and justify processes of exclusion. Although on first glance the dizzying variety of projects and range of foci may appear schizophrenic or amorphous, when examined through the lens of citizenship we can see that what these multiple projects and foci have in common is that they represent challenges and alternatives to specific aspects of the conventional model of citizenship that currently enjoys dominance in Italian public and political spheres. Looking at these multifaceted forms of opposition thus helps us see the most affective consequences currently generated by dominant citizenship models in terms of regulating belonging and participation in Italy and, I would suggest, throughout Western democratic contexts shaped by supra-national securitization processes and globalized neoliberal capitalism in a state of crisis.

For instance, CSOA participants model an alternative forms of participatory political engagement, which generates a form of non-exclusive belonging. Specifically, the particular form of self-management I observed pursued by social center participants is intended to displace the “culture of delegation” perceived as characterizing representative democratic processes, in which individuals hand over their decision-making powers (and, it is suggested, habits of critical reflection) to a ruling political class ever more detached from the concerns of everyday life. To this end, CSOA participants base their alternative model of citizen participation on consensus-based decision making processes and individual initiative. In this model, common resources, from economic profit and shared physical space to mass channels of meaning-making and representation, are (ideally) removed from market-based redistribution processes and pooled to be used for commonly
defined aims; the redistribution of resources is understood as an inherently political process that requires the active input of all participants.

Participants also imagine and model a form of citizenship in which “security” is not provided by the state (whether local or central) but is rather generated through horizontal social relations and the rejection of difference-base fear. This focus highlights the contemporary significance of securitization processes that single out specific populations for repression and restrict legitimate expressions of dissent. As the provision of security represents a key basis of legitimacy for contemporary state authority, the rejection of securitization by CSOA participants can also be seen as an affirmation of autonomy, as they model the idea that citizens can mutually support and protect each other without the need for a central state. Moreover, CSOA participants’ strategy of asserting the collective and political character of their struggles highlights the role of individually oriented legal processes in enforcing the state-generated rule of law and reproducing the veil of apolitical technicality underpinning state authority. CSOA participants also target, and in so doing, draw attention to, stigmatizing representations of protest and restrictions on expressions of dissent in public places that function to draw lines between “good” and “bad” political engagement, between legitimate and illegitimate forms of participation in the national political community.

Through their collective activity and discourse, these CSOA participants enact a form of belonging that does not depend on shared labels or ideological positions. It was precisely the way my research participants rejected traditional labels of political and civic membership that first drew my attention to the important role these forms of membership
have played in harnessing the potentially disruptive force of civil sphere and extra-electoral political engagement to the reproduction of hierarchical power relations in Italy. Unlike for instance traditional Communist Party logics of membership that suppress multiple forms of self-liberation in favor of working class unity (Rothenberg 2006:297), CSOA participants understand collective political engagement as beginning from the pursuit of autonomy, both at the individual level (as liberation from coercive or homogenizing identitarian categories) as well as at the group level (as freedom from the manipulation of civil sphere activity for institutional political ends).

In keeping with the kind of praxis-oriented activity that has long characterized Anarchist movements in Italy, they reject conventional sites of belonging such as the party, the Church, the nation or the territorially defined ethnic group in favor of a sense of solidarity and togetherness produced through the cooperative pursuit of collectively defined aims. Furthermore, the projects pursued at Italian social centers, from Migrant Coordination to No-Vat campaigns against Catholic hegemony and participatory mass media production, together with the daily practices aimed at dismantling barriers to participation, draw attention to specific contemporary political discourses and security processes that delimit the imagined Italian political and cultural community in terms of ethnicity, legal status, sexuality, age and class habitus while simultaneously excluding, suppressing and discrediting unruly forms of participation. In contrast, the CSOA mode of constructing belonging on the basis of participation rather than innate, preexisting qualities or adherence to ideological positions can be understood as new model of citizenship in which belonging and participation are closely linked, and in which
membership is not used to restrict participation and restricted participation is not used to
effect membership exclusions: CSOA participants come to belong by “doing” alongside
others in a space where key obstacles to participation have been deliberately dismantled
or drained of authority in order to render this form of belonging potentially open to all.

To analyze the character and implications of this form of belonging, I have drawn
on the concept of cultural citizenship. Though this concept was developed to describe the
particular form of belonging constructed by Latino communities in the US, not well
captured by existing race-based theories of collective identity construction, it has been
used by anthropologists more broadly to imagine and talk about forms of belonging and
participation outside of the framework of legal citizenship. The concept of cultural
citizenship has no doubt roused the interest of scholars in large part for the way it speaks
not only to belonging or to participation but to the intersection between the two, and the
way that dominant norms of membership delimit substantive participation: as Rosaldo
writes, cultural citizenship references the right to participate actively in (local) political
community, which he identifies as a form of belonging, without surrendering forms of
ethnic, racial or linguistic difference (1994: 57).

In initial descriptions of cultural citizenship (Rosaldo 1994a and 1994b, Flores
and Benmayor 1997), it is not clear what if any relationship cultural citizenship is seen as
having with legal citizenship, that is, if cultural citizenship is understood to represent
some form of challenge to formal, state-granted citizenship or simply exist beside legal
forms as an alternative that is affective in some contexts or ways. In applying the concept
of cultural citizenship in her analysis of Oregon farm workers’ organizing, Lynn Stephen
addresses this ambiguity by arguing that cultural citizenship is best treated as a heuristic device, something that helps us think about how citizenship works rather than something with its own material reality. In the case of Italian self-managed social centers, however, cultural citizenship may take a more affective, concrete form. The production of autonomy through self-management practices can, as I have argued, be read as a kind of displacement of key state functions and bases of authority, such as maintaining social order, reproducing group identity, and organizing economic and political relations. In this sense, within the autonomous spaces of CSOA, alternative citizenship models are not simply imagined but concretely enacted, day in and day out. Outside the center, participants’ alternative models are just that, an alternative to the dominant mode, most times contesting the authority of dominant models from a position of relative marginality. In some places and times, however, such as the improvised anti-fascist protest in Bolognina in front of the AN tent, the alternative model can expand and acquire authority so that it represents a true contender for people’s loyalty and imagination and functions as the basis of collective action and the touchstone of group solidarity.

Social center participants do not expect their alternative model of citizenship to suddenly gain the authority to replace formal, legal citizenship granted by the state. Indeed, the CSOA participants I spoke with have no interest in replacing existing forms of authority at the top of the political hierarchy. Rather, the construction of alternative models of belonging and participation through autonomous space represents a deliberate contestation of both the authority and function of state-based citizenship models. Like the “free radio” participants Jacqueline Urla describes as contesting “who will get to speak as
a public citizen and whose concerns or interests come to be regarded as matters of commonweal” (1995:251), social center activists seek to uncover and contest existing restrictions on who is allowed to speak as a citizen and how so, in order to open the whole process of constructing shared political imageries up to broader and more active participation.

By opposing the ethnic, religious, linguistic, generational and class-specific norms that define the cultural dimensions of contemporary Italian citizenship, they seek to enable the participation of all non-dominant subjects, be they working class or queer people, women, inexpert Italian speakers or young people with little experience in collective political engagement. The form of cultural citizenship thus produced can indeed function heuristically to help us imagine forms of active, diffused participation and unrestrictive belonging; the everyday practices through which participants construct their alternative, cultural citizenship can also help us see, concretely, how these forms might be generated and what effects they might involve. At the same time, by examining what CSOA participants oppose, we can also better understand what aspects of dominant citizenship models are currently perceived and experienced as most exclusionary and restrictive in delimiting belonging and defining legitimate participation in Italy and elsewhere.
APPENDIX 1

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR REGULAR PARTICIPANTS

Qual’è il percorso che ti ha portato al (XM24/Bartleby/TPO)? (What path brought you to XM24/Bartleby/TPO?)

-Sono o erano politicamente attivi i tuoi genitori? (Were or are your parents politically active?)

In quali modi partecipi al (XM24/Bartleby/TPO)? (How do you participate at XM24/Bartleby/TPO?)

additional prompt: E da quanto tempo?

additional prompt: Com’è nato/sono nati l’iniziativa/e a cui hai detto di partecipare? (How were the initiatives/was the initiative you participate in born?)

Quanto spesso vieni al XM24/Bartleby/TPO, e per fare cosa? (How often do you come to XM24/Bartleby/TPO, and what for?)

Hai le chiavi? (Do you have a copy of the keys?)

additional prompt: Per che cosa? (For what?)

Su cosa è d’accordo la gente di (XM24/Bartleby/TPO)? (What do the people of XM24/Bartleby/TPO agree about?)

Su cosa non è d’accordo? (What do they disagree about?)

Com’è definito un interno e un esterno? (How are insider and outsider defined?)

Com’è il rapport tra (XM24/Bartleby/TPO) e il quartiere? e il Comune? (What is the relationship between XM24/Bartleby/TPO and the neighborhood like? With the city?)

Come vorresti che fosse? (How would you like it to be?)

Cosa fai/fate per renderlo così? (what do you/you plural do to make it like you would like?)

additional prompt: Ti vengono in mente degli esempi specifici? (Can you think of specific examples?)

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Partecipi anche ad altri spazi sociali? (Do you participate at other social spaces as well?)

Se non esistesse XM24/Bartleby/TPO, parteciperesti ad altri spazi sociali esistenti (a Bologna, o altrove)? (If XM24/Bartleby/TPO didn’t exist, would you participate at another different social space (in Bologna, or elsewhere?)

Ripensando a tutte le iniziative o agli spazi a cui hai partecipato, hanno qualcosa in commune? (Thinking back on all the initiatives or spaces you’ve participated in, do they have something in common?)

additonal prompt: In altre parole, cosa deve avere un’iniziativa per attirarti? (In other words, what does an initiative need to have to appeal to you?)

Voti? (Do you vote?)

Perché /no? (Why? /Why not?)

Come ti defenisci politicamente? (How do you define yourself politically?)

Ti senti di appartenere a qualcosa? (Do you feel like you belong to something?)
APPENDIX 2

QUICK QUESTIONS FOR VISITORS TO XM24 WEEKLY MARKET

Età? (Age?)

Dove abiti? (Where do you live?)

In affitto o proprietario? (Rent or own?)

Studi? Lavori? (Do you study? Work?)

Come mai sei venuto/a la prima volta al mercatino? (Why did you come to the market the first time?)

    additional prompt: Con gli amici? Per passaparola? Visto quando passavi? (With friends? You heard about it? You saw it when passing by?)

Quanto spesso vieni al mercatino? (How often do you come to the market?)

Verso che ora? (Around what time?)

Perche vieni? (Why do you come?)

Porti/porteresti bambini al mercatino? (Do you/would you bring children to the market?)

Secondo te, al mercatino cosa manca? (What do you think the market is missing?)

Dove vai a fare la spesa altrimenti? (Where else do you go grocery shopping?)

Se non esistesse questo mercatino, cercheresti un’altra cosa simile? (If this market didn’t exist, would you look around for something similar?)

Secondo te, questo mercatino arrichisce il quartiere? Come? (Do you think this market enriches the neighborhood? How so?)

Vieni anche ad altri eventi qui al XM24? (Do you also come to other XM24 events?)

    additional prompt: Perche no? (Why not?)
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