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Quaderni del Laboratorio Interdisciplinare di ricerca su Corpi, Diritti, Conflitti

Geometries of Control:
Dynamics of Power, Oppression and Resistance

Issue 2

edited by
Riccardo Caldarera and Simone Tuzza

Sociorama
Norme, potere, controllo sociale

QUADERNI DEL LABORATORIO INTERDISCIPLINARE DI RICERCA SU CORPI, DIRITTI, CONFLITTI (V)

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Sociorama esplora le interconnessioni tra cambiamenti sociali, politici e giuridici, soffermandosi sui processi di istituzionalizzazione delle norme e delle loro specificità rispetto ad altre modalità di regolazione. La collana si rivolge a chi desidera esplorare, in un'ottica teorica ed empirica, i modi attraverso cui le società e le loro istituzioni affrontano il controllo sociale, la devianza, la criminalità e le disuguaglianze di potere, esaminando i diversi fenomeni anche in chiave di genere e intersezionale. I temi riguardano in particolare le trasformazioni delle democrazie e i conflitti che interessano le istituzioni politiche e giuridiche dalla prospettiva della sociologia del diritto e della devianza, analizzando la selettività delle norme, i processi decisionali e l'impatto del giuridico sulle comunità. L'obiettivo è offrire una lettura critica delle dinamiche socio-politico-giuridiche, supportando la ricerca accademica. All'interno della collana si situano le sezioni: a) «Ricerche», b) «Classici» e c) «Quaderni del Laboratorio Interdisciplinare di ricerca su Corpi, Diritti, Conflitti» / «Quaderni del Laboratorio su Rappresentazioni sociali della violenza sulle donne». Questa sezione si prefigge di valorizzare le attività seminariali, di ricerca sociologica applicata attivati all'interno del Dipartimento «Culture e Società» dell'Università degli Studi di Palermo.

La collana è sottoposta a un processo di *double-blind peer review*.

Settore di pertinenza della collana: Gruppo scientifico-disciplinare 14/GSPS-07 Sociologia della politica, del diritto e della devianza

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Reading the geometries of control: power, oppression, and contemporary forms of resistance
Simone Tuzza, Riccardo Caldarera[1]

This second issue of the editorial project *Geometries of Control: Dynamics of Power, Oppression and Resistance*, published in *Quaderni del Laboratorio Interdisciplinare di Ricerca su Corpi, Diritti, Conflitti - V*, develops and extends the path opened by the first issue by bringing into focus a new set of questions, materials, and spaces of inquiry. If the previous volume foregrounded institutions, care, sexuality, migration, and the regulation of bodies through a strongly interdisciplinary lens, this second issue places greater emphasis on the symbolic, urban, digital, and normative dimensions through which power is organised, experienced, and contested in contemporary societies.

What emerges from these pages is a wide-ranging and heterogeneous field of reflection, in which different disciplinary traditions and methodological approaches are not reduced to a single framework, but brought into productive conversation. The chapters collected here are written by PhD candidates, early-career researchers, and scholars working across sociology, gender studies, political theory, social psychology, criminology, law, and urban studies. Their contributions are grounded in diverse materials and methods – qualitative fieldwork, ethnography, digital ethnography, participant observation, interviews, qualitative content analysis, theoretical inquiry, and literature review – yet they share a common concern with the forms through which power is embodied, justified, normalised, and resisted.

Across its fourteen contributions, this volume moves through different scales and contexts, from Palermo to Bologna, from Chile to the digital sphere, from informal settlements to misogynistic online communities,

1. Simone Tuzza is a researcher at the Department of Sociology and Law of the Economy at the University of Bologna; Riccardo Caldarera holds a PhD in *Inequalities, Differences, and Participation* at the Department of Cultures and Societies, University of Palermo.

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from reproductive politics to the policing of protest. What connects these chapters is not a single object of analysis, but a shared attention to the ways control takes shape through institutions, norms, bodies, territories, and communicative processes, and to the practices through which subjects and communities negotiate, unsettle, or oppose those arrangements.

Geometries of control: bodies, discourses, territories, resistances

The title that frames this collective editorial project – *Geometries of Control: Dynamics of Power, Oppression and Resistance* – finds in this second volume a particularly wide and compelling articulation. If the first volume explored institutions, care, sexuality, migration, and the regulation of bodies through a strongly interdisciplinary lens, this second volume expands the map by foregrounding communicative struggles, gendered and sexual normativities, urban borders, deviance, state violence, and everyday practices of resistance. Across the chapters, control appears not as a fixed structure but as a mobile and relational arrangement: it takes shape in discourse and representation, in digital environments, in reproductive governance, in territorial marginalisation, in housing exclusion, in social norms, and in the violent dialogue between states and dissenting subjects.

The volume opens with Giovanni Scrivano's explicitly theoretical contribution on the elements of social norms. By proposing an integrated framework that brings together the factual, psychological, linguistic, and communicative dimensions of norms, the article offers conceptual tools that resonate deeply with the entire volume. In a collection concerned with the ways power is encoded in discourse, institutions, expectations, and everyday life, this reflection on normative messages provides an important theoretical hinge between social regulation and symbolic communication.

From this theoretical reflection on norms, the volume moves to Nicola Cavallotti's contribution on deviance as a socially and territorially produced phenomenon. Anchored in the case of Valtrompia, the chapter reconstructs the links between deviance, power, ecology, and capitalism, showing how deviant conduct can be read not merely as transgression, but as a privileged site from which to observe the social production of

normality itself. By combining socio-criminological reflection with an ecological and territorial perspective, Cavallotti highlights the relational texture through which meanings are stabilised, bodies are governed, and conflicts sediment historically.

From deviance and the territorial production of normality, the volume turns to state violence and dissent in Maria Giulia Molinaro Vitale's chapter on the militarisation of protest policing. Rethinking protest control through the lens of the criminalisation of protesters, the article argues that militarisation should be understood not as an exceptional response to disorder, but as a structural relation between the liberal democratic state and its inhabitants. By linking protest policing to colonial legacies, racism, and the depoliticisation of dissent, the chapter provides a powerful critique of how democratic states communicate with those who contest them.

Questions of violence, power, and resistance continue in Claudia Spagnulo's chapter, which takes the reader to Chile and reflects on gender-based violence during the Pinochet dictatorship as well as on the forms of resistance developed by women political prisoners and feminist movements. Through historiographic and theoretical sources, the article reads sexual and gendered violence not as a marginal aspect of authoritarian repression, but as one of its structural mechanisms. By bringing testimonies, feminist memory, and state violence into dialogue, the chapter powerfully links historical analysis to contemporary feminist debates on collective memory and political resistance.

From Chilean authoritarianism, the volume returns to contemporary urban margins in Chiara Francavilla's chapter on the informal urban settlement of Santa Maria Maggiore in Vicofaro. Through situated ethnography, participant observation, and interviews, the contribution rethinks the border not as a line separating inclusion from exclusion, but as a mobile and conflictual site where informal governance, everyday cohabitation, and resistant practices emerge. Francavilla highlights how marginalisation is actively produced and administered, while also showing how the margin can become an epistemic space from which subjects generate knowledge, relational networks, and alternative forms of inhabiting the city.

Urban space as a terrain of exclusion and possibility also lies at the centre of the chapter by Virginia Musso, Valentina Novak, Giulia Piaz-

za, and Irene Terenzi. Their contribution reframes the right to the city through an intersectional feminist lens, reading both space and body as socially produced and power laden. By analysing body-centered political practices, counter-odonymy feminist interventions, and tactical frivolity as laboratories of counter-spatiality, the chapter shows how marginalised subjectivities re-signify urban environments through affective, aesthetic, and counter-hegemonic forms of resistance. The city appears here not only as a geography of control, but also as a laboratory of feminist political imagination.

The focus on urban vulnerability is further sharpened in the contribution by Manuela Maggio and Maria Felicia Polimeni on female homelessness in Bologna. Their qualitative study, based on interviews with social workers and operators, foregrounds the growing yet often hidden presence of women in homelessness trajectories. By showing the links between housing precarity, gender-based violence, invisibility within service systems, and precarious survival strategies, the chapter insists on the necessity of a gender-sensitive perspective for understanding and addressing homelessness.

Questions of body, autonomy, and neoliberal power continue in Giada Cascio's chapter on surrogacy, reproductive labour, and self-determination. By reading gestation through feminist theories of relationality and vulnerability, the contribution critically examines how neoliberal discourse translates bodily self-determination into the language of contractual freedom, production, and consumption. Cascio challenges abstract and individualised understandings of freedom, bringing into focus the situated condition of gestating subjects and the intersectional forms of oppression that shape reproductive choices. Her chapter rethinks rights not outside but through embodiment, dependency, and social relations.

The volume then turns to sexual normativity and its violence through Francesca Rita Comella's chapter on acephobia. By addressing asexuality as a frequently erased and pathologised sexual identity, the article investigates the forms of discrimination and violence experienced by asexual people, both within and outside LGBTQIA+ spaces. Through a combined analysis of academic literature and public comments on social media, Comella links acephobia to the broader regime of compulsory sexuality, thus showing how invisibility, corrective practices, and symbolic erasure function as mechanisms of oppression.

Masculinity returns as a central theme in Christian Di Carlo's contribution on drug use and gender norms. Reviewing sociological literature on substance consumption, the chapter examines how dominant models of masculinity shape health practices, risk behaviours, and the symbolic coding of certain substances as masculine. The analysis shows that drug use may function both as social glue and as a site of competition within homosocial settings, revealing the deep entanglement between health, vulnerability, and the performance of male identity.

Digital socialisation is also central to Vincenza Myriam Scaduto's chapter on the incel community. Through digital ethnography of Italian online forums, the article investigates how shared language, emotional reinforcement, and echo chambers contribute to identity formation and ideological radicalisation within misogynistic male spaces. Scaduto's contribution reveals how online socialisation becomes a mechanism through which discomfort is organised into collective discourse, turning frustration into exclusionary and gendered narratives about power, sexuality, and entitlement.

The broader ideological and political grammar of these digital masculinities is then explored in Natale Feo's chapter on the Manosphere as a field of symbolic domination and identity rearticulation. Drawing on Foucault, Butler, Connell, and Gramsci, the contribution examines how online male subjectivities are constructed, legitimised, and politicised within a digital ecosystem structured by hegemonic and reactionary discourses. Feo shows that the Manosphere often presents itself as a site of resistance while in fact reproducing exclusion, patriarchy, and authoritarian models of gender. The chapter thereby illuminates the biopolitical and ideological functions of contemporary digital platforms.

Questions of discourse, framing, and symbolic struggle re-emerge in Giulia Agolino's contribution on abortion and competitive framing processes. Focusing on three posters produced by the Italian pro-life association Pro-vita e famiglia, the chapter explores how anti-abortion discourse appropriates other social issues, such as migration, disability, environmentalism, and gender violence, to delegitimize pro-choice positions. Through qualitative verbal and visual analysis, the article shows how communicative strategies do not simply persuade, but work by reframing, instrumentalising vulnerability, and asserting symbolic and moral

superiority. In doing so, the chapter places narratives and frames at the centre of contemporary struggles over power and resistance.

A final, quieter form of resistance emerges in the contribution by Alessio Castiglione, Enrico Mele, and Chiara Amico, dedicated to silent shared reading in Palermo. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews conducted during the New Reading Party, the authors show how an activity commonly understood as solitary can become a communal and transformative practice. Here resistance is neither spectacular nor overtly confrontational; it is enacted through quietness, emotional connection, bibliodiversity, and the creation of non-competitive forms of sociality. Their chapter offers a subtle but powerful reflection on culture as a space of micro-political resistance and collective well-being.

Taken together, these contributions offer a broad and articulated account of contemporary geometries of control. They show that power does not operate only through formal institutions or explicit coercion, but also through norms, discourses, spatial arrangements, digital environments, symbolic boundaries, and unequal conditions of visibility and legitimacy. At the same time, the volume highlights the plurality of resistance: resistance appears in feminist re-significations, in urban practices of reappropriation, in historical memory, in situated knowledge, in acts of naming and critique, and even in quieter forms of collective presence and cultural participation.

This second issue confirms the value of the *Quaderni* as a space for emerging and critically engaged scholarship. The works gathered here differ in method, scale, and object, yet they are united by a shared commitment to examining how power shapes bodies, subjectivities, territories, and social meanings, and how such processes may be challenged from within everyday life, political struggle, and critical inquiry.

Conclusions and acknowledgements

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to all the authors who contributed to this second issue of *Quaderni del Laboratorio Interdisciplinare di ricerca su Corpi, Diritti, Conflitti. Geometries of Control: Dy-*

namics of Power, Oppression and Resistance. Their work, commitment, and intellectual generosity made this volume possible.

We are especially thankful not only for the quality of the contributions collected here, but also for the willingness of each author to take part in a shared editorial and scientific endeavour. In different ways, all the chapters gathered in this issue speak to the urgency of critical research capable of engaging with the transformations of the present and with the tensions that shape contemporary social life.

We also wish to extend a broader thought to research itself, and in particular to the many young scholars who continue to carry it forward under increasingly precarious conditions. At a time when academic work is so often marked by uncertainty, fragmentation, and lack of recognition, it seems all the more important to reaffirm the value of rigorous, critical, and intellectually courageous inquiry.

Our hope is that the future of the university and of education more broadly may still be built around openness, accessibility, public responsibility, and the concrete possibility for new generations of researchers to study, teach, and produce knowledge with dignity and freedom.

Social norms between facts, ideas and messages. Towards a unification of the theoretical framework concerning the elements of norms
Giovanni Scrivano[1]

Introduction: the sense of unity

In the study of the forms of human interaction, a central place is occupied by the concept of the "social norm". This is naturally motivated by the central role that they occupy in the regulation of human coexistence and, conversely, in the definition of what in it is considered as deviance or non-conformity, and therefore as deserving of sanction (or reward) within the group. Precisely such importance, in my opinion, justifies an effort toward a more precise conceptual analysis of norms, which may in turn result in a more precise understanding of their concrete mechanisms of functioning within societies. Therefore, it is to this operation that we will devote ourselves in the course of this paper.

Social norms have long been studied by a variety of social sciences, in particular by social psychology, sociology and, to a lesser extent, by legal theory. Now, in each of these areas of study it is possible to find a plurality of different research perspectives[2], to the point that those who devote themselves to the analysis of this literature gain, on the one hand, the impression that, certainly, in recent years there has been important progress in the study of this phenomenon, but, on the other hand, I believe also the feeling that there is a lack of a unified framework in which these reflections can be placed.

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1. Giovanni Scrivano is an independent researcher.
2. For an overview of the points of consensus and those under debate, see Legros and Cislaghi (2020).

In fact, the various sociological, social-psychological and juridical theories that have dealt with social norms have understood them alternately as purely psychological phenomena (for example Fittipaldi, 2022; 2023), communicative (as seems to be the position, for example, of Sarzotti, 2019a; 2019b), only factual (Geiger, 2018), or again merely linguistic (Scarpelli, 2014a; 2014b). My impression, when I devoted myself to the analysis of these theories, was that each of them failed to usefully account for this or that aspect of what we ordinarily designate with the term "norm", and this seemed to me to be due to the fact that each theorist tended to consider the norm as a phenomenon in some sense one-dimensional, that is, in turn only psychological, linguistic, and so on. Likewise, I saw that many of the problems that these reductionist conceptions of norms left open could instead be resolved by integrating their perspective with that of theories that instead focused on different aspects of the phenomenon, but which, by reducing in turn norms to only one of their many dimensions, failed to accommodate problems that the first ones solved.

It was precisely such a state of things that gave me the idea to carry out an analysis of these various research perspectives in order to propose a conceptual systematization, sociological in nature, capable of holding together the various elements that the literature has, from time to time, connected to norms, a systematization that recognizes the plurality of the aspects of norms and therefore adopts a non-one-dimensional approach to their treatment, showing at the same time the very close interrelations among these various aspects. In the course of this paper, therefore, we will try to show how, in reality, norms in general, and social norms in particular, are better understood as phenomena that are absolutely multifaceted, and my aim will be not only to give even a brief image of these various aspects, but above all to try to present them in an ordered and unified way, showing the importance of their reciprocal interrelation. This importance, I want to argue, is so fundamental as to make fundamentally insufficient any conceptual arrangement of norms that does not take into account this plurality of elements. What will result from this will be a proposal for the conceptualization of norms as phenomena that develop on various levels, which I hope may serve to make appreciated this peculiar nature of norms.

Our approach will therefore be the following: we will consider norms as social facts that present four main and interconnected elements, which we will therefore analyse. After having briefly framed social norms within the broader normative landscape of societies, we will move on to analyse the first element of norms, the factual one: indeed, if in the social context a rule exists, it will give rise to certain facts and behaviours. Afterwards, we will take into consideration the second element attributable to norms, the psychological one, which I understand as consisting in the socially widespread model of a conduct as in some way due or obligatory. Such a model, nevertheless, is spread in the social context through forms of "normative terminology", that is, it is communicated (or in any case formulable) through forms that broadly correspond to deontic modalities. According to this systematization, such an element represents the third aspect of norms, the eminently linguistic one. I will then deal with the ways in which norms are spread in the social context, and in particular I will first dwell on their communicative aspect, constituted by normative messages, and then on those norms are not formulated at first through forms of normative terminology or discourse.

It should be noted already from now that, as it will become clear, I take the aforementioned "normative terminology" as a fundamental and indeed definitory element of norms. Such understanding poses nonetheless one in the predicament of accommodating norms not expressed in normative discourse: I will try to solve this problem by introducing what may provisionally be named a "principle of formulability". This should thus be taken as a further proposal of mine, central to my understanding of norms, though here I will not be able to explore all possible implications of such addition.

As is obvious, for reasons of space it is not possible here to carry out an in-depth analysis of each of these aspects, nor of all the points of debate concerning them. Our proposal of conceptualization of the norm certainly contains elements that can also be discussed, but in this context what interests us is not so much to defend a specific way of understanding norms, but rather to show that it is possible to adopt conceptions that hold together the plurality of elements that literature has in fact associated with the phenomenon of norms. Conceptions of this kind, of which mine represents only one example. However, I believe that even those who do not share the conceptual choices adopted here may agree on the

presence, in norms however one wants to understand them, of many of the elements that I will examine here, and consequently recognize the potential usefulness of a non-reductionist approach to their treatment.

To conclude this brief introduction, a clarification is necessary, namely that we understand norms as socially widespread ideas about how human behaviour must be, and that they are spread through forms of normative discourse. In reality, as I have argued elsewhere, it would be more appropriate to designate such ideas with the more general term "prescriptions", and to reserve for "norm" and "rule" (which in reality are themselves slightly different things, but which I will treat here as synonyms, while referring for a more detailed discussion to Pino, 2021, pp. 233-236) an even more specific meaning. For me, they are indeed ideas about how a behaviour must be, and therefore a type of prescription, but they concern "general categories of actions", and in this sense they are opposed to prescriptions of particular actions, that is, "orders" (I take up the distinction made in particular by Bobbio, 2012, pp. 12-25). For our limited purposes, however, we can adhere to the use of common (and often also academic) language, and use here "prescription", "norm" and "rule" as synonyms, while warning the reader that a different language is not only possible but, in my opinion, also desirable.

From social norms to intersubjective normativity

To begin, it is appropriate to specify which concept of "social norm" I take as relevant in my exposition, as well as to explain its relationships with other forms that social normativity can assume. As mentioned, the strands of literature that deal with the concept of "social norm" hold positions that are also partially different from one another, and for them social norms can be variously defined as «evaluations of behaviour at the group level», that is, widespread ideas about which behaviours are to be approved or not (Horne and Mollborn, 2020, p. 468); or as individual beliefs about what will be approved or disapproved by the group (Legros and Cislaghi, 2020, pp. 66-67); or again as standards of behaviour «appropriate for [social] actors with a given identity» (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 891).

Here I will adopt a partly similar perspective, although it is necessary to keep in mind that often in the literature the term "norm" is understood as a synonym of "social norm"[3]. I will in fact understand social norms as a subcategory of norms more generally understood, and specifically as all those norms spread and practised spontaneously within the social context, without having been established by States or other organisations. In this way, it follows that social norms are not essentially different from other kinds of norms except for the spontaneous contexts in which they are established and practised; nevertheless, apart from this assimilation (the reasons for which I will soon explain), they present all the characteristics that the literature mentioned above has attributed to them.

Social norms are therefore such as those found in the field of morality, of gender and sexual relations, of etiquette and good manners, sometimes of fashion, and so on. To give some concrete examples, we can mention those according to which one must shake hands with those one meets, not interrupt when others are speaking, say "please" and "thank you", arrive on time for appointments, and similar things. In the sphere of gender relations, we can mention those according to which women and men should dress in a way that conforms to their gender, men should not cry, and so on.

It is clear that such norms are very numerous, and the literature that has made them its object of interest has not failed to highlight their extreme variety. Indeed, within the same social context there can even be different ones for different persons and groups who live together (as may be the case in a society, or even a neighbourhood, where different ethno-religious groups coexist), and they may sometimes also be in contrast with one another or with the law, or the latter may even end up uprooting them (Carbonara, 2017). Among social norms, those that are important in law are in particular the "customs", which are long-established social norms and, as regards the matter they regulate, are particularly close to law (Ross, 2021, pp. 88-91); often it is precisely because of these characteristics that they are also applicable in courts.

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3. There are even those (Horne and Mollborn, 2020, pp. 468-469; Carbonara, 2017) who seem to maintain that only social norms deserve the name of true "norms", as such distinct from "rules", which are issued by non-state organizations, and from "laws", which are instead issued by states.

As mentioned, here I intend to consider social norms as only one expression – although perhaps the broadest, and certainly the most spontaneous – of the more general phenomenon of "social normativity". In practice, for me[4] social norms are not essentially different from legal norms or from those of non-state organisations, except for the forms and contexts in which they are manifested. To equate social norms with only one form of the broader normative phenomenon constitutes, as is clear, a conceptual option that may or may not be shared, and I do not expect to convince everyone. Nevertheless, I believe that such a way of proceeding avoids drawing distinctions where there are no differences sufficient to justify them: in fact, all rules, independently from the authority or body (or indeed the group undistinguished, such as in the case of social norms) from which they emanate, seem to share the characteristics I am to expound below. I certainly believe it to be so, and indeed during the following discussion I shall draw examples from all forms of normativity to try and form a unified framework.

To judge of the applicability of my conclusions to all kinds of normativity will be left to the reader: what is certain, however, is that such an assimilation opens the way to the use, in the analysis of social norms, of the results achieved by non-sociological legal theory, something which in my opinion allows for a more complete analysis of the concepts examined here.

For reasons of space, this point of view cannot be explored further, but I nonetheless intend to make its usefulness emerge indirectly in the course of the discussion. I intend in fact to deal here in general with "norms", and to analyse them assuming that social norms are one of their categories. The analysis will therefore benefit both from the literature on "social norms" in particular and from that on law, which has mainly dealt with legal norms. The fact that, as will be seen, many of the conclusions that the two fields have reached almost independently are actually overlapping and can be combined in a unified view such as the one I propose here, may serve as (albeit indirect) evidence that the phenomena which the different branches of literature were analysing were in fact overlapping.

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4. In this, I place myself particularly in the tradition of Italian sociology of law, from which I shall at least mention Ferrari (1996) and Sarzotti (2019a).

The empirical existence of a rule

Having briefly framed the social norm among the phenomena related to it, we can now move on to the actual analysis of its elements, and begin by looking at the factual aspect of a norm. We can say that there exists an effective norm, that is, one concretely practised, in a social context when among several subjects in relation with one another there is the idea of a behaviour as a duty, a permission, or a power for at least one of them, in such a way that either the subject will conform to the model of conduct, or there will follow a negative reaction towards the subject motivated by the deviation; instead, if the sanction is positive, when the prescribed action is carried out there will follow a reward, motivated by conformity. When these conditions exist, we have an effective norm: that is, it exists in the social context and concretely motivates conduct.

We note that one of the distinctive characteristics of norms is that, when they are practised in the social context, as clearly highlighted by legal literature (for example, classically Hart, 2002, pp. 14-15; and Geiger, 2018; more recently Muffato, 2014, pp. 138-139; and Guastini, 2024a, pp. 131-132) and not only (I mention here Gibbs, 1965, p. 589; Horne and Mollborn, 2020, pp. 468-469), one can observe some form of hostile or unfavourable reaction, or a form of "punishment" that someone (such as the police in the case of law, or ordinary bystanders in the case of many social norms) will impose in case of violation. This can consist of criticism, a reproach, coldness, animosity, contempt, or other things still, up to more severe penalties such as legal ones, which will be imposed if one holds a conduct different from that commanded by the norm.

Now both obedience to the rule and the reaction to a behaviour that violates it are empirically observable facts, so that if there is a rule, we will see in fact people holding certain behaviours. These facts, that is, action and reaction to violations, can be summarised in the following scheme, which is a simplified form of the one given by Geiger (2018, p. 149):

$$N = s \begin{cases} \text{c} \\ \text{c}' \to \text{r} \end{cases}$$

As can be seen in the scheme, the norm (N) – at least in its content of directly observable facts – consists in an alternative (represented by the bracket) such that, in the situation s (for example, inside the restaurant where smoking is prohibited), either the conduct prescribed by the norm (c) will occur, that is the commanded conduct conforming to the model, or, if a conduct not conforming to that of the norm occurs, that is the deviant conduct (c'), one will witness the reaction of the other subjects. The norms factual content consists precisely in this alternative between conformity and punishment, studied by Geiger (2018, pp. 146-149), who calls it a *subsistent norm*. For us, instead, it will be the basis of the effective norm, that is, that rule which does not remain a dead letter, but on the contrary begins to live and be followed in the social context, as is the case with the one that prohibits smoking in restaurants.

In reality, the effectiveness of a norm consists of many aspects which, as the literature has highlighted, can help us to understand whether a norm exists. For example, one can look at what people regularly do, what they expect others to approve or disapprove, or what would make them feel embarrassment if others were to find out (Horne and Mollborn, 2020, p. 469), or again, for what they would feel the need to apologise. Nevertheless, reaction is in fact very important, so much so that empirical research on social norms has often treated its existence as a privileged element to understand whether a social norm exists (Ivi, p. 470).

This is because, if we define norms, as the majority of the literature does (and I make no exception), as those models for the non-observance of which one witnesses a reaction, then only if we witness a reaction, or if we can conclude with sufficient probability that it will occur, can we speak without any doubt of the existence of a norm. If we were to rely only on obedience, or on some of the other indicators mentioned, we would not necessarily ascertain the existence of a real norm, but we might confuse it with other types of directive, such as advice, pleas, requests, or even socially widespread opinions, which, like rules, can orient conduct. But if we ask ourselves whether a certain model of conduct is a real norm, a rule, well, we cannot be sure of this until we witness a reaction or have other elements to believe that it is probable.

The norm as an idea of obligatory conduct communicated through normative discourse

Now, as has been noted (Hart, 2002, pp. 67-68), action and reaction to a possible deviation appear, in norms, as "connected" to each other: indeed, both the conforming conduct and the reaction toward those who deviate from it are motivated by the fact that the subjects consider that behaviour as conforming to (or deviating from) a model to be followed. This model, this socially widespread idea of a behaviour as obligatory (or permitted, for that matter[5]), constitutes, in the view that I propose here, and in which I do not believe I depart from a large part of the existing literature, the norm properly so called.

Thus, we can see that a norm consists in its essence of an idea or model (Ferrari, 2004, p. 42) of conduct to be adopted in certain situations, and therefore that it is a psychological phenomenon[6]. At the same time, the model constitutes the psychological aspect of that multifaceted and broader series of phenomena with which we deal when we speak of "norms". In fact, when such a psychological phenomenon becomes widespread among several individuals, it is capable of motivating actual events (Legros and Cislaghi, 2020, pp. 67-68; but this is also the position of Weinberger [cit. in Passerini Glazel, 2020, p. 18]), such as behaviours and reactions to deviation.

This makes it clear how the presence of one of these ideas of behaviour in the minds of agents is the precondition for an effective norm, that is, for those regularities of behaviour and reactions to deviation from them that we can observe in the social context, and on which our analysis has so far focused. In fact, if the subjects did not have in mind the model of a behaviour as obligatory, they would not at all be acting on the basis

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5. "Duty", "permission", and "power" are the various deontic modalities – that is, the different ways in which someone's conduct must, in some sense, be. This is not the place to explore these modalities in further detail, but it will suffice to say that I follow here Kelsen's own framework (2021, pp. 16-21), which distinguishes between the duty to perform or refrain from an action, the permission likewise to do or not do something, and the power to establish binding norms for others.

6. On these positions we may mention Amselek and, above all, Weinberger, for whom norms were "ideal entities", belonging to the realm of thought (cit. in Passerini Glazel, 2020, p. 17). Among more recent authors, the view of the norm as an "idea of behaviour" seems to me most explicitly stated in Ross (1978, p. 87). For an overview of the various currents that have regarded norms as an ideal phenomenon, I again refer to Passerini Glazel (2020, pp. 41-44). Among more recent authors, see Legros and Cislaghi (2020, pp. 66-67); Hawkins *et al.* (2019, p. 3); Fittipaldi (2022, p. 16).

of a norm, and therefore one could not say that it is being practised, but at most that they are freely performing an action that happens to coincide with that prescribed by the norm. In Hart's example (2002, pp. 164-165), this is what makes the difference between a chess player and a child who happens to move a chess piece correctly without knowing the rules. The first has in mind the model of the obligatory action and shapes his moves accordingly; in the case of the child, instead, the norm is not present.

The opinion that norms are ideas in the minds of subjects, as we have seen, has illustrious precedents in legal literature, and I believe, as I will show, that it enjoys a decisive advantage in explaining many forms of normativity. Naturally, it must also be kept in mind that here the term "idea" has a very broad meaning: it means that norms live in the world of mental objects, of the representations of individuals and therefore, precisely, in their psyche.

Now, saying that norms are models of behaviour for the deviation from which a reaction occurs certainly has its advantages, which will be made more evident later, but it also opens up a significant problem. This consists in being able to distinguish norms from some kind of inter-subjective opinion. It is precisely here that my systematisation departs from the prevailing ones. In fact, especially the literature on social norms seems to group under this label different phenomena: it cites as examples of social norms both behaviours that are only generally frowned upon, such as "not asking too personal questions of people with whom one has a superficial relationship", as may be, let us say, with a passer-by, and ac-tual "rules", that is, behaviours that someone has actively prohibited, that are ordinarily described as things one "should not do", or with similar expressions.

The two things, in my opinion, are very different. Some authors in the literature have indeed compared social norms to "rules" of some kind: I share this view, but I believe that one must be aware of what we are talking about when we talk about a "rule". It is not in fact a simple wide-spread opinion or merely something frowned upon, but something pro-hibited, something that someone in certain circumstances must or must not do. To understand this point, however, it is necessary to introduce and analyse another aspect of norms, the third, that is, the linguistic one.

The linguistic aspect of norms becomes relevant as soon as we notice that when we ordinarily speak of "rules", we are in fact referring to models of behaviour that are more or less ordinarily formulated and spread through those expressions that Hart traced back to "normative terminology" (Hart, 2002, pp. 69-70): expressions such as "one must", "it is forbidden", "one should", "one does not", and so on. Precisely in this respect I adopt a position that differs from other theories, although it also has illustrious exponents. In addition to the already cited Hart, I can mention Ross (1978, p. 87), Sarzotti (2019a, p. 43), Finnemore (1996, pp. 22-27): according to this position, then, normative expressions are not accidental to a discourse on norms, but their use contributes to defining norms as such.

Thus, norms are indeed ideas of behaviour, but ideas that find a particular linguistic formulation, and we can understand that we are dealing with one of them when subjects ordinarily speak of it using some form of "normative terminology". According to this conceptualisation, subjects follow a rule if, when they justify their actions on its basis, or reproach and criticise someone for an infraction, or again teach the norms to someone who does not know them, in all these cases they make use of deontic expressions of various kinds, such as "duty", "right", or of the imperative mood, or again of appropriate deontic operators, such as verbs like "one must", "one may", "one does so", "one does not do that", and so on (*Ibidem*).

In reality, and we will provide examples later, the linguistic formulation of a norm may at first even be absent, as often happens precisely with those particular rules that are social norms. I believe that a good criterion of distinction could be (this is to be understood as a proposal) what I call the principle of formulability. According to it, briefly, we can ascertain the existence of a rule not linguistically formulated by proceeding ourselves to formulate it with the aid of that "normative terminology" previously mentioned, and then submitting it to the agents, for example, during interviews. If that behaviour is regulated by a norm, the agents will tend to share that formulation; otherwise, they will reject it.

Thus, we can formulate a widespread habit as: "usually one does not eat polenta and venison on the beach in summer", but if we try to ask a subject: "But is it true that in summer, on the beach, one should not eat polenta and venison?", that person will immediately be perplexed and

will answer something like: "Well, it's not that one cannot, or that it's forbidden, but it's certainly strange". I add here that this is a concept that I rework from Jori and Pintore (1995, p. 241), who speak of a similar principle of expressibility. However, my use of the concept differs both from theirs and from that of Searle (cit. in Passerini Glazel, 2020, pp. 25-26).

Thus, it can be seen that the criterion I adopt to distinguish when we are dealing with norms, and not therefore with simple opinions or social habits, is based not only on that set of facts examined in the third paragraph (actions and reactions), which on the other hand may not be immediately observable, but also on various communicative aspects. The linguistic aspect thus becomes, in a systematisation such as this, an equally central and defining aspect of norms.

Nevertheless, the view presented here can be traced to those currents that see in the norm a non-linguistic but ideal, psychological phenomenon[7]. The only point on which I depart from them is in maintaining that yes, norms are entities of thought, but that language plays a fundamental role in allowing us to ascertain them and to distinguish them from other forms of models of behaviour.

I believe that such a view may have its validity, as it succeeds, on the one hand, in encompassing most of what we refer to when we ordinarily speak of norms, but on the other hand remains distant both from the excesses of conceptions of the norm as a (solely) ideal entity and from those of the theories that consider it only as a phenomenon inextricably tied to linguistic expression. Let us then see what these excesses are, starting with those of the more "psychological" theories of norms, leaving to the next paragraph those proper to the conceptions more centred on their linguistic aspect.

First of all, I believe that this proposal overcomes many of the shortcomings of the more purely ideal conceptions of social norms, which understand rules as purely immaterial entities of various kinds, such as «dispositions»[8], «evaluations of behaviour» (Horne and Mollborn, 2020, p. 468), «standards of appropriate behaviour» (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 891), or again beliefs or expectations about what will be ap-

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7. For a good general introduction to these approaches, also in relation to those that regard norms as an exclusively linguistic phenomenon, see Passerini Glazel (2020, pp. 15-26).

8. This appears to be the position of Fittipaldi (2022; 2023), who draws upon the work of Leon Petrażycki.

proved or not by the group (Legros and Cislaghi, 2020, pp. 66-67), and I have already briefly mentioned some of the reasons for this. These views probably capture well many aspects of those low-intensity norms that are in many cases social norms, but, as I have said, in many cases they fail to distinguish with sufficient precision norms from values, attitudes and opinions, providing us with a concept that is too broad. And I believe that such a defect is due to the lack of reference to the linguistic practices that we have presented. In practice, if in a social context a behaviour is discouraged by a social norm in the sense I gave here to the term, there will *also* be opinions that oppose it; but the defect of the psychological conception is essentially to think that these "standards", these "expectations about what will be approved", these "models of appropriate behaviour", exhaust the nature of the norm. In the view presented here, the behaviour proscribed by a norm is not only something toward which subjects have a negative opinion, but also something from which they consciously believe and affirm that there is a duty to refrain.

Certainly, and especially for rules spontaneously spread in a social context (as are, for example, those of good manners), these evaluations, opinions and values widespread in the group will play an important role, since the real rule of not eating with one's hands probably presupposes the collective evaluation of that act as improper and impolite. But the evaluation in this case also translates into a norm, as we can see from the fact that children are ordinarily taught that "one does not eat with one's hands": the two things, in my view, are not to be confused.

An example can be the following: many people consider eating snails to be disgusting, therefore it is an act that they evaluate negatively, just as those who practise Islam consider eating pork to be disgusting. Yet, only in the latter case do we find this evaluation practised as an explicit standard of behaviour in a social context; proof of this is that if we ask a Muslim whether in his religion "it is true that one *must* never eat pork", he will answer yes without much thought. Instead, if we approach someone who simply feels disgust at eating snails and ask whether that is something one does not do, we will hardly obtain such a clear answer.

A criterion of distinction such as the one I have proposed here may not be extremely precise, but I also have some doubt that, when dealing with fluid concepts such as those of norms, maximum precision is possible. In fact, as with all concepts, there are and will always be doubtful and

uncertain cases. This can be seen, for example, by examining precisely the social norms of good manners and etiquette, rules different from legal ones that can often not even be explicitly formulated. The nature of these social norms (such as those that tell us that one must respect queues, shake hands with those one meets, say "thank you" and "please") is not as fixed as that of the norms formulated in laws, and on the contrary, the passage between a norm and a habit can be fluid. Moreover, a social norm can be more or less widespread, and the same behaviour can be considered by some as something that one should do, therefore a kind of rule, while for others it is only a widespread habit. An example can be, for us, taking off one's shoes when entering the house, something that in some countries is a true rule of good manners, taught to children and so on, while in others it is an indifferent or even well-regarded behaviour, but not an obligatory one.

The derivation of norms from social reality: normative messages

Having therefore established that a norm, for us, is an idea of action, a mental representation that nonetheless is expressed through forms of normative discourse, we must see the concrete forms through which these representations are communicated and transmitted in social reality. This also allows us to examine the other extreme from which the conception of norms that I have set out aims to keep its distance, namely to see them only as a linguistic phenomenon.

To do this, we can start from an idea expressed by Alf Ross (1978, p. 87), who draws a distinction between the "directive", that is, the idea that we have called norm, and the "directive discourse", that is, a way of speaking that indicates how one must act (and which is assimilable to "normative terminology" in the terminology that I have here rather drawn from Hart, also using "normative discourse"). We thus see here a distinction between the idea of due conduct and the utterance, the written or oral sentence, that expresses it. Nevertheless, I must reiterate: in the conception that I have set out, that the norm is expressed (or expressible, according to the principle that we have examined) in forms of normative discourse is an aspect that serves to define it as such.

Nevertheless, the distinction between the norm as ideal model and the language that expresses it deserves to be preserved, and it is fundamental for the legal theory of interpretation, where in fact there is the basic distinction between the "provision", which is a text that is a source of law (Pino, 2021a, pp. 27-28), and the "norm" that is drawn from it as a result of the process of interpretation and constitutes its meaning (*Ibidem*). Thus, if we take Art. 575 of the Criminal Code, according to which «whoever causes the death of a man shall be punished with imprisonment of not less than twenty-one years», what has just been reported is the text, therefore the provision. The norm, instead, is what is drawn, after understanding the text in the light of the rules of the Italian language and interpreting it appropriately (for example, understanding that "man" in reality does not indicate only male human beings, but all human beings): it is the idea of obligatory action, which in this case is the duty not to kill persons. A similar idea is also found in Sarzotti, who shows that first of all norms, which here we call prescriptions, are:

> […] cognitive artefacts, that is, artificial entities that mediate between the human mind and the world of phenomenal reality by providing interpretive schemes of that reality (attribution of meaning) and guidance for the actions of individuals who operate in it (orientation of action) (Sarzotti 2019a, pp. 40-43)[9].

Further adding that:

> […] one must free oneself from the idea, dominant in the modern conception of normativity (in particular legal), that the norm is a linguistic entity that precedes and is independent of its interpretation (*Ibidem*)[10].

This criticism is in fact very important, and in the course of this section I will try to show why I consider it well founded. Although indeed the norm is a model of behaviour that is defined (also) by being expressed through a certain type of language, the norm in its essence is not a proposition in normative terminology, but the meaning that this expresses.

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9. My translation.
10. My translation.

What is true is that in most cases norms are drawn from acts of communication that are linguistic in nature, written (such as an article of the Criminal Code) or oral (such as the order: "close the door!"). This point is well acknowledged in the literature: for example in Ferrari (2004, p. 42), but also in Ross (1978, pp. 87-90), and in Bobbio (1994, pp. 181-182), according to whom:

> The message contained in a norm can be communicated through different kinds of signals. It suffices to think of road signs and the precise conventions that regulate them. But in general norms are expressed and communicated through language, that is, by means of spoken or written statements, of which the typical example is the laws of a state […] (Bobbio, 1994, pp. 181-182).[11]

Well then, here we intend to deal more particularly with these "different kinds of signals". In this view, in particular the provision of legal theory, which is usually a text in language, will therefore go together with the colour of the traffic light or with signs to be part of the broader category of "normative messages". This constitutes the fourth aspect, the communicative one, of the phenomenon of norms, and here we will examine it in more detail.

The concept of normative message is a contribution of the sociology of law, and in fact serves to broaden the concept of "provision" long present in legal theory to take into account the fact that norms can also be expressed in ways other than a text. The concept of normative message, therefore, includes all acts of communication that are intended to transmit norms. They are not only those that are written or oral, such as the statements and provisions of codes of law, but the latter are only one example of normative messages – namely those formulated in written language – and from them, as in the theory of interpretation, norms are drawn.

The "message" is basically an act of communication (Sarzotti, 2019a, pp. 41-42), verbal or otherwise, by which an emitting source intends to transmit to the addressee of the message some information, which the latter will extract as a result of interpretation. In the case of a "normative" message, the content is a norm. The conception of legal doctrine regard-

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11. My translation.

ing the speech act that "carries" the prescription overlaps with that of the normative message so well that I believe a good definition of "normative message" is found precisely in Bobbio, who writes that «[…] by "prescriptive propositions" or "directives" are meant those whose function is not to give information or to express feelings, but to influence the behaviour of others directly […]»[12] (Bobbio, 2012, p. 31). Although Bobbio did not explicitly deal with normative messages, I believe it may be fruitful to understand by normative message that act of communication whose function is to influence the behaviour of others directly, and this equation is made possible by the fact, mentioned earlier, that legal theory was already dealing, through the concept of "provision", with the same phenomena included in the category of "normative message".

However, it should be noted that our definition of normative message as an act of communication by which an emitter intends to influence the conduct of others does in truth depart partially from that offered by Sarzotti (2019a), on whom I have mainly drawn regarding these messages. This is because Sarzotti also speaks of "unintentional" normative messages (Ivi, pp. 74-82), which is to say, messages that orient action without, however, having been explicitly conceived for this purpose. An example that is given is that of literature: if I read The Betrothed and draw from it the idea that one must not try to steal other men's wives, Manzoni's masterpiece becomes a normative message, albeit an unintentional one. In my opinion, such a view overextends the concept excessively and ends up depriving it of effectiveness. Instead, in line, it seems to me, with the position of the literature on human communication in general[13], I consider it better to call "messages" only those acts of communication by which the emitter intends to transmit information to a counterparty, and which are therefore pragmatically intended by the emitter for the recipients' uptake. In this context, normative messages are those messages whose function is to influence the conduct of others.

The forms that a normative message can take are the most varied. To give a couple of examples drawn from the simplest form of directive, the verbal one: laws (verbal and written normative messages) express directives, and they often do so even without the use of normative termi-

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12. My translation.
13. On this point see Sacco (2007, pp. 190-191) which also provides extensive literature on the subject.

nology (as we saw in the example "whoever causes the death of a man is punished…"). Or a verbal normative message can be expressed with rhetorical questions, as when Don Abbondio, the character of the famous Italian novel *The Betrothed*, says to Lucia: «Would you like to shut up? Or do you want to ruin me completely?»; or even with exclamations, as when the Manzonian curate puts his finger to Perpetua's mouth and says "For heaven's sake!" in order not to let her reveal his encounter with Don Rodrigo's men, and certainly not to express his state of mind[14].

The pragmatics of a message, that is, the intention of the emitting source to influence the behaviour of others and thus to express norms, can in these cases be inferred from the context, and this even when the message lacks that normative terminology of which we have spoken (on this point, which is very important, I intend to return below). The importance of context can be seen from the fact that, for example, when we see a law come out of Parliament in the Official Gazette, we are ordinarily inclined to think that the function of that act is actually to influence the conduct of citizens even if it does not employ terms such as "duty" or "power". This is because we know that the legislative power and the Official Gazette have always served to establish rules for the community. Such a process of understanding may not always be easy and there may be errors: a normative message may perhaps be perceived by the other side as a simple question, as in the case of someone who answers the question "do you have a lighter?" – which is normally used to borrow it politely – by simply saying "yes", thus taking it as a request for information.

Finally, Sarzotti (2019a, pp. 58-82) offers us an effective taxonomy of the various types of normative messages, and for completeness it is useful to report it here. They can indeed be verbal, that is, expressed in a language consisting of sounds articulated into words, which in turn can be divided into written (such as laws) and unwritten (such as an order addressed to us by a police officer in the street). Otherwise, they can be non-verbal, that is, transmitted through the use of signs other than words: these are divided into iconic, that is, transmitted through the use of images (such as road signs); sonic, which are transmitted through sounds of various kinds (such as a siren that signals the end of working hours on a construction site); or behavioural, that is, expressed with ges-

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14. The examples are from Bobbio, 1994, p. 185.

tures of various kinds (such as those of the traffic officer who directs traffic)[15]. Very often, however, non-verbally formulated normative messages like those just set out will need, in order to be understood, other messages that clarify their meaning (Ivi, p. 80). For example, the meaning of signs, sirens, and the traffic officer's gestures is established by the rules of the Highway Code, which attribute to them a specific meaning, which in turn is taught in driving school.

Now, the general procedure by which the prescription is "extracted" from the data of reality, including the normative message, is its interpretation. This is in particular the position of the sociology of law (Ferrari, 2004, p. 43; Sarzotti, 2019a), because legal theory has focused more on the interpretation of texts. This is understandable, since modern jurists mostly deal with texts, whether they are codes of law, regulations, the constitution, and the like. This state of affairs is reflected in the definition of interpretation given, for example, by Pino (2021a, p. 7), according to whom interpretation is roughly definable as an activity that consists in attributing meaning to authoritative texts, such as codes of law.

Here we are dealing with a narrower view than ours, but one that is probably sufficient to include the most important cases in which interpretation comes into play. I do not take a position here, but it is enough for me to say that the "broad sense" interpretation of legal sociologists, the one that we have adopted, seems to coincide with a general extraction (or attribution) of normative meaning from the social context, and thus not only from a normative message such as a written text. This general form of attribution or extraction of meaning seems to me to be decomposable into various kinds of mental paths, such as, for example, the learning of a prescription by imitation, the simple understanding of a normative message, or an actual reasoning about which prescription to draw from a normative message or from another source, which seems to be the "narrower" sense of interpretation with which the theory of interpretation deals.

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15.   I take all the examples from Sarzotti (2019a, pp. 58-82).

The derivation of norms from social reality: unexpressed norms

Already through the idea of the normative message, the conception of norms as linguistic entities begins to be no longer sufficient. In fact, normative messages are acts of communication intended to influence the conduct of others, as we shall see, but not all of them are based on language (and moreover, when they are, they are not necessarily so through forms of normative terminology). Indeed, it is possible to be told what to do, to cite a few examples, with a hand gesture, with the sound of a siren, or with the image of a road sign. In all these cases we understand what is expected of us without the aid of language: if we were to adopt a purely linguistic view of norms, understanding them as normative propositions of some kind, we could hardly accommodate such phenomena. The limit of the linguistic theory of the norm is therefore even more evident when one considers, as we have done, that these ideas of behaviour can be drawn not only from real statements in language that are formulated with the purpose of orienting conduct, but from facts of experience of the most diverse kind. These may also not be normative messages, and I will now try to give a brief overview of how this can happen.

In social reality there are indeed norms that present themselves in a tacit manner. In cases such as this, one can apply an interpretative procedure that allows us to draw a model of conduct even from behaviours motivated by norms that the subjects do not state, as, for example, an anthropologist might do by looking at behaviour dictated by a customary rule in a distant society whose language he perhaps does not yet know. If, for example, he were to see someone in the village steal another's property, and then find that the next day no one speaks to the thief anymore, he could reasonably suppose that there is present there a norm according to which "whoever steals a goat must be punished with ostracism".

Naturally, the process of drawing a prescription from unstated norms can also be less linear: perhaps a child, by imitation, seeing around him social norms that have not yet been explained to him, gives himself a representation that may be inaccurate. For example, seeing his mother greet three people in a row in the street, whom she nevertheless knows, he may erroneously interpret that there is a duty to greet all passers-by in the street, whereas in reality it is good manners to greet only those with whom one has familiarity. At this point one will probably proceed with a

trial-and-error system, through clashing with various kinds of mistakes, until one learns the correct form of the norm (or sufficiently correct to avoid continual reproaches for its infraction). Thus, the child may start greeting anyone in the street, and the mother will reproach him for this, and this will allow him gradually to assimilate the correct norm, that is, the more socially consolidated and widespread form.

All this, finally, can happen all the more easily the more there exists a relatively defined form of the norm, and behaviours are not only the result of an overlapping consensus, as MacCormick says. According to him, the explicit formulation for the norm that reads

> In cases where people seek a service or opportunity that cannot be supplied to everybody simultaneously, each ought to take their place in line after any one who arrived earlier at the point of service or place of opportunity, and each is entitled to go ahead of any who arrived later […] (MacCormick 2007, p. 15.

which is a perfect example of extraction of the norm from observation – may not be shared exactly by everyone. For example, some may think that children can skip the queue, others not; nevertheless, there exists a part of this norm that everyone shares, on which there is, precisely, overlapping consensus, and on this basis the norm succeeds in orienting actions with good precision in most cases (*Ibidem*) and thus spreading in the social context.

Now, it is clear that one would really have difficulty accounting for all these examples that we have mentioned if we understood norms as only a linguistic phenomenon, that is, as simple propositions by which someone tells someone else to do something using some form of normative discourse: on the one hand, because there exist norms not explicitly formulated in language, whether tacit or transmitted by non-verbal normative messages; on the other, because even verbally formulated norms do not always make use of normative expressions. Such a "linguistic theory" indeed constitutes the other extreme from which the conception that I have proposed intends to keep its distance. In fact, although I have said that a formulation through normative terminology constitutes the linguistic aspect of norms, and that in fact when we ordinarily speak of a "rule" we seem to presuppose it as a defining characteristic of the concept, this

does not remove the fact that they are ideal models: if it were not so, it would not be possible to systematise norms not formulated verbally, or formulated without the use of the aforementioned normative discourse.

These two classes of phenomena, which we have analysed in the course of this and the previous section, can however be accommodated in my proposal of conceptualisation if one brings back to mind what I have called the "principle of formulability", which allows us to understand whether a model of behaviour is prescribed by a norm that is not formulated in normative terms by also producing ourselves this formulation. If it is a norm, the agents will tend to share its formulation, more or less as the readers of this paper may have been led to do by reading the formulation of the rule of the queue that MacCormick provided above.

Conclusion: *color est e pluribus unus*?

In conclusion, I believe that from our exposition one can quite easily observe the fact that we recalled at the beginning – namely, that the various theories can usefully be integrated with one another in a unified vision, thereby achieving a greater explanatory potential than would be possible if each were taken separately.

Indeed, we began from the analysis of the factual elements that suggest the presence of norms in the social context, but these facts can be confused with mere regularities or spontaneous reactions if one does not take into account a proper psychological aspect – namely, that norms are ideal models of behaviour. The theories that reduce norms to a psychological phenomenon, which we have seen to be widespread particularly in the literature on social norms, nonetheless suffer from the great difficulty of distinguishing rules from intersubjective attitudes and opinions. This difficulty, however, can be overcome with the contribution of part of legal theory (for example Hart and Ross), according to which norms are ideas of action formulated through normative terminology. From these theories, a particular linguistic aspect of norms – understood as propositions of some kind – emerges clearly, but they struggle to account for all those norms in which, at least initially, no linguistic formulation can be found at all. The shortcomings of this conception can be overcome by referring to the socio-legal theory of the extraction of normative meaning

from experiential data, whether normative messages or data of another kind. However, this latter position had the flaw of reducing norms to the normative message that transmits them, thereby excessively extending the concept, which in turn could nevertheless be limited again with the contribution of classical legal theory (Bobbio).

I then tried to solve the main problem of such theories, that is accounting for unexpressed norms, by proposing to recur to what I called the principle of formulability, according to which I consider unexpressed *norms*, and thus not merely opinions, ideas and dispositions, those which are immediately shared by agents upon being formulated in normative terminology. I believe this accommodation to be fruitful, in that it enables a more precise understanding of norms, such as the one proposed by Hart and Ross, to encompass customary and social norms, indeed being one of the most relevant forms of normativity. This principle thus acts as the cornerstone to the unified vision of norms I tried to put forward, allowing to link the theory of norms as psychological models or ideas with that which considers them linguistic entities, a position I indeed consider to draw more precise boundaries to the concept of "norms".

In short, what has emerged is a framework that is undoubtedly complex and multifaceted, yet perhaps appropriate for better describing concepts that are themselves complex, such as norms. Precisely for this reason, I believe that in the future of studies on norms a greater dialogue among the various branches of knowledge that have made norms their object of interest is to be hoped for.

With particular regard to a part of the literature on social norms, finally, one may still hope for a greater engagement with legal theory. I believe that this need may emerge especially if one considers the partial indeterminacy of the concept of "social norm" as it appears in many of the theories we have examined (Horne and Mollborn, 2020; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998; as well as many of those cited in Legros and Cislaghi, 2020). Indeed, I have said that in these frameworks norms seem to me to become difficult to distinguish from intersubjective opinions concerning the sphere of others' conduct. In reality, social psychology has developed a satisfactory set of concepts applicable to collective opinions and evaluations of certain behaviours, which can capture reality just as well without unnecessarily invoking norms – in what seems to me an avoidable duplication.

A duplication that I believe can be avoided only by taking proper account precisely of some of the results of legal theory that we have sought to set out here, even though it is, of course, imperative to take into consideration the need for their re-elaboration so as to adapt them to the requirements of a more properly sociological theory.

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Deviance, power, and capital. Ecological links: the case of Valtrompia
Nicola Cavallotti[16]

Over recent decades, transdisciplinary research aimed at investigating the roots of deviant phenomena, criminal behaviors, or other forms of socially constructed stigma has confronted the scientific debate with new epistemic challenges, many of which remain only partially explored (Rinaldi, 2009). I decided to situate the questions that emerged in the literature within a clearly defined geographical context, the case of Valtrompia, thereby placing the construction of deviance within a long-term historical perspective. In this sense, deviance has emerged as an epistemological field of extraordinary importance, both for the study of the production of locality (Torre, 2011) and for the analysis of the historical conflicts underlying local dialectics, as well as for a critical deconstruction of capitalism (Cavallotti, 2025a). My initial interest was to explore whether deviant behaviors could be traced back to the ways in which territoriality had been produced in Valtrompia. Deviance, understood as a social construction, is located within that space of production and crystallization of meaning in which social practices are typified, institutionalized, and shared (Sperber, 1992), acquiring a degree of durability such as to naturalize their perception. In attempting to grasp the historicity of the phenomenon, I ultimately came to foreground the historical processes constitutive of the unit of analysis, which thus became the substantive center of this research. In the following paragraphs, I will briefly outline the reasons why historicizing the phenomenon proved to be a crucial operation for grasping the connections between phenomenon and power, phenomenon and capital, phenomenon and space. Already Ciacci and Gualandi emphasized the need for a de-reification of the concept of deviance through an investigation of the historical and social conditions that brought it into being (Ciacci and Gualandi, 1977). Building on this

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etiological requirement, in these pages I intend, first and foremost, to account for the relations of social production of deviance, adopting as a guiding hypothesis that they are inscribed within a broader configuration of power relations. The analysis starts from the assumption that, in modern society, dispositifs of power are primarily organized within the capitalist logic of social production and reproduction (Simoncini, 2020). The approach adopted thus moves along a theoretical axis that recognizes, on the one hand, the legacy of the Marxian critique of political economy as a key for interpreting material relations of production (Marx, 1978) and, on the other, the Foucauldian contribution to conceptualizing power as a diffuse network embodied in forms of knowledge, bodies, and everyday practices (Foucault, 1976, p. 1006; Elden and Crampton, 2016 pp. 118-122).

Why do deviances tell us more about ecology?

The empirical evidence brought to light by the research conducted in Valtrompia has demonstrated several fundamental connections: forms of deviance can be traced back to relations of production and to hierarchies inscribed within the local socio-ecological organization; the latter, consolidated over the last five hundred years as a dominant ontology, constitutes an ecological regime (Moore, 2015) resulting from a specific form of conflict – the ecological conflict – which is not univocally confined within the human species alone (Sabadash, 2012), but rather, adopting a political-ecological perspective, unfolds between different species and organisms, thereby renewing the historical agency of extra-human actors (Cavallotti, 2025a). Within the same line of thought, the analytical results have allowed for further integration. Alongside the "four cheap factors" identified by Moore (2023) – labor power, food, energy, and non-energy productive inputs – which are necessary for capitalism to lower the overall organic composition of capital, I have considered it possible to add a fifth element, decisive within the capitalist strategy: cheap space (Cavallotti, 2025c). Harvey (2018) defines the capitalist "spatial fix" as the construction of an optimal geography through which capitalism resolves its contradictions and overcomes crises. To this end, it proved fundamental to adopt landscape as a privileged domain through

which to reflect on the dialectic between social morphology, stratification, and spatial hierarchization, observing the forms assumed by the built landscape and the ways in which power has been transmitted and distributed within it. Within this theoretical and historical framework, I intend to introduce and further develop two additional analytical concepts that cut across the case study: persistent ecological crime (Cavallotti, 2025a, p. 23) and ecological peripheralization[17]. The former makes it possible to interpret the long-term aggression against ecosystems as a form of structural violence not always codified within legal systems, yet recognizable through its durable effects and its systemic reproducibility; the latter allows us to observe how, under hegemonic ecological regimes, specific territories and communities are consistently positioned at the margins of value distribution and protection, bearing, in this case, the damages produced by the capitalist model.

What, then, is the relationship between this type of space and the behaviors inscribed in its history, in its capacity to be both produced and to act as an influential agent upon bodies and ecologies, upon relations between territorial actors and agents, between humans and non-humans? Crimes and forms of deviance in Valtrompia constitute merely the tip of an iceberg whose mass lies beneath the surface: the dimension of persistences, borrowed from historical methodology, namely those elements that survive the passage of history by consolidating themselves within societies, resisting crises and regime changes (De Luca and Sabatini, 2012). Persistences are composed of practices, institutions, ideologies, cultural models, economic structures, and dispositifs of power that condition ways of life transversally across time and space. To grasp the frequencies of these persistences, I have drawn upon the genealogical method employed here to deconstruct conceptual lineages and sedimented practices that laid the foundations for the construction of normalities. These normalities – plural, because multiple – always carry within them residues of the normalities that preceded them. From this point of view, deviations arise as offshoots of the ecologies that generate them (like all human be-

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17. This concept seeks to build upon its traditional definition within socio-historical studies (Arrighi and Piselli, 2017, p. 56), integrating it with the processes currently shaping territories, where marginality materializes from a socio-ecological perspective, manifesting through the recurring environmental crises that stress these territories and jeopardize their habitability (Gerundo, De Salvatore and Marra, 2020).

havior, for that matter), but unlike other types of behavior, they allow us to draw boundaries and view normality from a privileged perspective (See Colombo, 1992, p. 428). Precisely because they are fractures *of* normality and *within* normality, starting from them allows us to observe how the rest around them has developed to construct them (see Foucault, 1972, p. 28 and pp. 129-130).

The following pages are part of a broader field research project lasting approximately two years (10/2022 - 07/2024). The theoretical hypotheses on Valtrompia are supported by ethnographic research and a qualitative methodology inspired by historiographical methods, which I used to approach the study of secondary sources. In particular, in order to implement knowledge of the socio-anthropological micro-worlds encountered, and therefore focus on specific experiences, emotions, and representations (Giorgi *et al.*, 2009), I engaged in dialogue with theorists of the longue durée (Braudel, 2009; Tomich, 2011; Chakraborty, 2024) on the one hand; and microhistorical approaches (Levi, 1992; De Vito, 2015) to address the ecological question, the epistemic centrality of space, and the relevance of the points of view of individual subjectivities situated in their time and space, so as to intercept the cultural, historical, morphological, and urbanistic psychic vectors (Giorgi *et al.*, 2009) that contribute to create landscapes and define normality and deviance.

Capitalism in Valtrompia and the five paths of ecological conflict

The origins of capitalism in the valley constitute the field of inquiry from which I have drawn, to position Valtrompia within history and geopolitics, understood as part of the world-system. The debate internal to the various Marxist traditions on the ecological dimensions of Marx's thought has generated an extensive body of literature (Leonardi and Torre, 2022); in the case of Valtrompia, the task was to establish several fundamental points starting from this debate. First, it was necessary to identify the historical reasons why the valley was subsumed into the circuits of the relevant world-economy, and, from there, to determine the trigger for the process of primitive accumulation that would give rise to a specific ecological regime. Subsequently, it was important to identify the crises that disrupted the inertia of history – moments in which the

dominant ecology fractured, risking extinction, while a victorious ecology was selected, one that would persist until the next crisis. Third, the ecological relation itself had to be examined: that is, the ways in which the conflictual relationship between humans and the rest of the material world evolved, including non-human natures, other organic elements, and additional environmental factors. On the one hand, the valley experienced a unified geopolitical history, a condition of operationality that concerned the territory as a whole throughout the long collective history of Valtrompia. However, according to this analysis, depending on the composition of *natures*, the internal ecological organization of communities, and the social division of labor that evolved from them, the paths towards capitalist development in Valtrompia were five.

Each path, based on its internal organization, experienced evolutionary trajectories that were interdependent yet characterized by a degree of autonomy. An initial geographical decomposition makes it possible to identify five interdependent historical trajectories, each marked by specific features that express their particularities. I then reconstructed the history of each of these trajectories as possible paths of ecological conflict, with the aim of typifying the evolutions experienced by each path and offering a potential model that could be replicated elsewhere. The reconstruction proceeded in a differentiated manner: I identified the historical starting point of each path starting from the specific triggers that, respectively, defined the entry of each portion of Valtrompia into capitalist organization in different ways and at different times. The decision to model local history by dividing it into five trajectories finds justification in the differences inherent in them and in the attempt to typify the diverse ecologies analyzed. Through the paths of ecological conflict experienced by Valtrompia from the 13th century to the present day, it is thus possible to construct a model of five ideal-typical trajectories of capitalist evolution for each of the territorial areas composing Valtrompia. Each of these expresses a distinctive ecological combination that typifies its historical function in relation to capital: the path of weapons (Gardone Valtrompia and the Gardonese area), the path of mines (Collio and Upper Valtrompia), the path of the rebar (Nave and the Garza Valley), the path of the factory-city (Lumezzane and the Gobbia Valley), and finally the path of the infinite city (Concesio).

The path of the weapons

The path of weapons, which developed in the Gardone area from the 15th century onwards, was characterized by six main evolutionary features that shaped its ecological identity. First, the Gardone area was distinguished by the presence of a mono-sectoral productive apparatus which, for a significant part of its history, was tied to the extraction of ore from the mines of the upper valley (Del Barba, 2008). This apparatus not only oriented production throughout the valley, but also profoundly influenced the organization of *natures* – human and non-human – within the triumplian system. This centrality of the manufacturing productive dimension points to a specific configuration of the society-nature relationship, based on an extractive approach characterized by the near absence of circularity (Semeraro, 2020). This configuration relied on the intensive mobilization of local labor power, raw materials extracted from the upper valley, and locally available environmental factors (Ivi, p. 99). It was realized not only as a society-nature relationship, but also as a society-society relationship, that is, through internal transformative processes and phase transitions – between one cycle of territorialization and another – which transmitted and consolidated, around this productive dimension, the very existence of the Gardone community (Ivi, p. 91). The second distinguishing element was the integration between local environmental resources and the productive process. The valley, rich in iron minerals, crossed by watercourses and with slopes covered by forested areas, provided both the raw materials and the energy potential necessary to sustain forges and workshops. This indissoluble link between natures and production contributed to strengthening the ecological identity of the area, defining a relationship that was simultaneously symbiotic and conflictual between non-human nature and industry. This relationship persisted until the 20th century, subsequently evolving towards a progressive autonomy of the latter from the former – by effectively shifting the symbiotic relationship to another phase of the industrial process, namely the disposal of industrial effluents (Grottolo and Mazzoldi, 1989)[18] – while leaving the extractive regime model unchanged. Third, this context has

18. This is one of the main characteristics of ecological marginalization processes (see also Maranghi, 2016, p. 103).

been described as «an economic reality characterized by a centuries-long intermingling of private initiative and state-determined economy» (Ferraglio, 2008, p. 75). More than three hundred years of Venetian domination (1426-1797) turned the Gardonese into a strategic hub for weapons production, activating that condition of operationality which would thereafter characterize the entire valley. The survival of the weapons sector rested on two historically recurring strategies: acting upon the labor force, drastically reducing it (Semeraro, 2017), or acting upon the product by shifting towards civilian weapons or diversifying production. In Valtrompia, the production of civilian firearms represented a necessary sector to survive the instability of state commissions. To this day, workers and industrialists are – very often – also hunters and firearms enthusiasts. Closely intertwined with the economic bond is the ideological constraint: the legacy of a culture whose foundational assumptions are rooted in the firearm itself. The concept of ideology adopted here follows the elaborations of Dumont (1991) first, and later Boltanski and Chiappello (2014): a set of shared beliefs, inscribed in institutions, engaged in action, and therefore deeply anchored in reality. This represents a key point in the analysis of Gardone capitalism, a critical reading of which cannot overlook the ideological structure that underpins it – the cultural medium in which the grammar of the Valtrompia world is immersed. The regimes of justification among those who inhabit the path of weapons seem morally more resilient than in other contexts, where moral contradictions – though not only moral ones, given the extremely rapid turnaround times of crisis processes – constitute an integral part of local discursive systems as well as of individual value orientations (Cavallotti, 2025b, pp. 197-205).

Fourth, the organization of labor was structured around a fragmented model characterized by pronounced specialization: a network of artisanal workshops, each contributing to a specific phase of weapons manufacturing (Serugeri, 2023). The intensive production of weapons, defined by the complexity of artisanal operations, required strong specialization and the consequent fragmentation of the production cycle. This model, known as the «disseminated factory» (Braudel, 1977, p. 288), was based on a social division of labor extending along the main watercourse, where each phase of iron processing was carried out by specialized artisans (Ferraglio, 2008). The *fraglie*, craft guilds, regulated the distribution of commissions

and the management of remuneration, maintaining control over every production phase to guarantee economic and social stability within the valley (Del Barba, 2008). Fifth, the evolution of the productive district was marked by the rise of the merchant class (Rizzinelli, 2010), which gradually reduced the artisan-producer to the condition of a wage laborer (Semeraro, 2020). The commercialization of products, the procurement of raw materials, and the related credit were increasingly monopolized by merchants who aimed to make labor as inexpensive and manageable as possible, eliminating, for example, the distinctions between master artisans and worker-artisans (*Ibidem*).

Finally, a component of social conflict must be noted in the Gardone area. Despite significant episodes of unionization and mobilization, largely due to the high concentration of workers, industrial elites proved capable of neutralizing the explosive force of social conflict by adopting traditional instruments aimed at undermining its effectiveness and fragmenting its aggregation, the very core of all social struggles. The early and intensive economic activity favored the concentration of political power in the hands of those who owned the means of production and controlled the pivotal space of the Gardone ecology: the factory. The process of ascent of a dominant class is exemplified by the Beretta family, whose role within the Gardone community remains highly significant to this day. The factory also enabled the emergence of other centers of power – such as workers' conflicts and their political representatives at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and between the 1960s and 1970s of the 20th century – which, despite representing highly significant moments of conflict, did not disrupt the inertia within which this portion of the valley persisted. The mutualistic-paternalistic Zanardellian model of the late 19th century, supported by industrialists (Semeraro, 2020) and later articulated through the thirty-year experience of Christian Democracy in the post-war period, consolidated political power relations in the Gardone area. The district remained an industrial monoculture until the 1970s (Semeraro and Miranda, 2023). The centuries-long presence of the Gardone area within the "global" arms market produced a normalizing and justificatory culture towards the product, as well as a dependency upon it (Cavallotti, 2025b). The production of locality in the area developed through relations with the weapon and its centers of production.

The contemporary landscape represents the projection of this path of ecological conflict. Post-war industrial-oriented urban expansion has produced a present-day operational landscape embedded within a narrow pre-Alpine valley, where architecture has been stripped of its aesthetic mark, urban development is functional to industrial organization, and mobility is centered almost exclusively on the use of the automobile[19]. The Mella River, from which Valtrompia originates, has seen its habitat increasingly reduced due to factories and buildings constructed in its own riverbed; thus, it has been collecting industrial effluents for decades[20]. Meanwhile a culture historically linked to hunting has produced a landscape dotted with bird hunting hides (Casella, 2009), often resulting in the privatization of portions of woodland, limiting access for other users interested in crossing mountainous areas (Cavallotti, 2025b, pp. 372-373). Attempts to legally restrict hunting have brought out the most unregulated and aggressive aspects of this activity, such as poaching and other illegal practices (Troiano, 2023)[21]. However, the collective perception of these practices is only partially affected, as they are still deeply rooted in the locality and landscape that this ecological conflict has produced.

The path of the mines

The path of the mines, as it developed in Upper Valtrompia in the 13th century, displayed four main characteristics. First, it was characterized by the centrality of two normative frameworks which, within a strongly organized social structure, found a form of complementarity: on the one hand, the public and centralized management of common goods (woodlands, forests, and pastures); on the other, mining extraction and metal processing organized according to a form of free market internal to the

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19.   During peak hours on weekday mornings, traffic on Via Triumplina exceeds 2,000 vehicles per hour heading south and over 1,000 vehicles per hour heading north. Comune di Brescia, *Studio viabilistico finalizzato alla verifica di assoggettabilità alla VAS ai sensi della D.G.R. 9/761 del 10.11.2010*, Febbraio 2013, p. 27. (See also Tartaglia, 2016).

20.   Conference proceedings: *Lo stato dell'ambiente nella provincia di Brescia. L'acqua l'aria il rumore*, Brescia 30 marzo 1995, p. 66.

21.   See also ISPRA, 2020, *Piano d'azione nazionale per il contrasto degli illeciti contro gli uccelli selvatici*.

community. In the pre-communal period, the *vicinia* maintained control over common goods administered at the level of the *pieve*, the basic unit of economic relations and an expression of the centrality of ecclesiastical institutions in that context (Rizzinelli, 2007). The collective management of common goods ensured the subsistence of communities and reinforced internal organizational structures (*Ibidem*). Their great abundance facilitated aggressive spoliation, which repeatedly required institutional intervention; once their finitude was recognized, constraints and prohibitions were strengthened. Within a regulated and structured context, customary practices persisted, while institutional presence simultaneously increased through the intensification of normative production. The management of mineral resources reflected a widespread awareness of the possibility of generating significant economic surplus and, consequently, of producing collective enrichment. In turn, this wealth made it possible to compensate for a weak agriculture and artisanal sector, incapable of producing long-term rent. This explains the absolute freedom of enterprise guaranteed by local statutes until well beyond the 17th century, even at the expense of overriding landownership (*Ibidem*). Second, the political-economic dynamism of Upper Valtrompia between the XIV and XVI centuries can be traced to the strategic value assumed by the area due to mineral resources and extractive activity. The autonomy of Upper Valtrompia was consistently accepted by the central administrations of the Milanese and Venetian dominions, which alternated in granting fiscal exemptions to secure privileged bilateral relations over the exploitation of mines, above all with the city of Brescia and the Republic of Venice (Archetti, 2006). This period thus anticipated the subsumption of Upper Valtrompia into the circuits of capital. Productive specialization and integration into international military and metallurgical markets were the outcome of a progressive transformation of territorial power relations. Third, the path of mines was based on the maximization of the exploitation of available labor power, both human and non-human. Among environmental factors in particular, the forests of the area were fully exploited to generate fuel, to the point of requiring purchases from the neighboring Valsabbia due to the inability to meet demand through local availability (Abati, 2008). This resulted, among other consequences, in the production of low-quality local charcoal. A similar exploitation characterized human labor: all family members were employed in agro-silvo-pastoral

activities and in extractive practices. Women and children were engaged in activities ancillary to mining, such as porters or ore sorters, fostering a hierarchical organization of roles within communities based on occupational position, distinguishing adult men from others. This system of labor division persisted until the end of the 20th century. Mining labor ensured the collective subsistence of Upper Valtrompia communities, but at extremely high physical cost: exhausting, degrading, risky and poorly paid (Archetti, 2006). In the longue durée, it can be argued that this conflict ecological path was organized entirely around mining labor. In these spaces, the time of active men was consumed, along with their economic resources – since extractive activity relied on individual initiative or very small self-financed companies – and their physical strength, with severe consequences for their bodies, often leading to premature death. This misery also undermined mining activity itself, rendering it at least partially unproductive. This mono-ecological tendency, structured around a single relational spectrum, impoverished other relational possibilities.

The experience of the upper valley helps us grasp the precariousness of the material conditions upon which the most recent ecology has been constituted here and in many other mountain contexts. What remains today is a residual landscape, derived from the previous mining ecology, now reconfigured into an ecology organized around tourism and its various forms, some of which are highly impactful, especially in times of global warming (Mercalli and Berro, 2016); around the last remnants of an agricultural economy that is increasingly marginal and unsustainable for those who do not enter industrial production; around the possibility of conserving the most scenic landscapes precisely in order to render them "valuable" in touristic terms; and around the depopulation of human inhabitants, a phenomenon that appears difficult to halt. Peripheralization thus finds in these contexts a more favorable dimension than elsewhere in which to further aggravate conditions of habitability (Pedrazzini, 2019), especially for humans who struggle to survive in economically non-resilient areas. At the same time, these spaces become sites for the development of new subjectivities, more or less invasive, which find in human retreat and rising temperatures new margins for their existence, adapting to altered conditions. This situation risks further exacerbating conflict among the various inhabitants (human and non-human): altered environmental conditions generate precariousness for some and

new strengths for others; some adapt, others succumb, others proliferate. A rigid, non-adaptive and non-collaborative ecology – indeed, a predatory one – leads humans to react, often aggressively, to emerging living beings or to new modes of existence of others. These are stigmatized in their very existence, accused of being the carriers of the problem, and approached through obsolete methods and non-futurible forms of planning conceived almost exclusively to favor the local economy. In this respect, this path of ecological conflict appears capable of producing a form of deviance resulting from the peculiar, close-range and perennial conflict between humans and non-humans, typical of less urbanized scenarios adjacent to historically harsher environments, where contact with animality is now confined to a few spaces and limited to a small number of humans. In such contexts, animality is culturally framed within the domestic-livestock versus wild-nature binary, a condition now generalized in Western societies.

Within such a scenario, I asked myself whether it might be possible to speak of *deviant animality*, when animal presence is considered untamed, invasive, or transgressive – namely, when it is not located within its "usual" habitat but, for instance, ends up in urban spaces in its search for food (as in the case of the bear recently sighted in some villages of the valley; or of the wolf or the wild boar). Or epidemic, when proliferation becomes invasive, as in the case of the bark beetle (Celona, 2023); and/or pathological when endowed with a viral load (one might think of swine fever in other contexts) with large-scale effects. This form of deviance appears functional both to reinforcing speciesist hierarchies and to manifesting human power over the rest of the living world, but also – within political speculation – to identifying a subjectivity to stigmatize, a scapegoat enemy upon whom to concentrate social anger while obscuring anthropogenic responsibilities in environmental degradation. All this can only aggravate, what I've called, *the ecological peripheralization*, whose effects can be contained solely by imagining new relational possibilities among local networks of life, decentering the role of the human and rethinking mountain dwelling outside neoliberal market logics, within a dimension of fragility (multispecies and organic), exposure to risk, and post-catastrophe (Nitrato Izzo, 2017). In this perspective, it becomes necessary to recognize new subjectivities and to politicize relations with them, whether human or non-human, vegetal or mineral (Pelgreffi, 2018).

The case of Nave (BS), emblematic of the Brescia area's economic evolution founded on the expansion of the steel industry and on the valorization of the rebar market, offers an interpretive key to the post-war economic boom and the correlated industrialization as manifestations of a structural ecological crisis. The country's accelerated modernization was based on the availability of low-cost labor and on the intensive use of natural resources, generating widespread ecological conflicts – symptoms of already advanced environmental, social, economic, and climatic crises (Vignaroli, 2008). During the 1950s, Nave and the Garza Valley underwent a profound productive reconfiguration, as a territorially embedded system historically shaped by agriculture and artisanal paper-making was progressively reoriented toward steel production, laying the foundations for a localized steelmaking district (Abati, 2012). In this transition, elements of continuity and rupture intertwined: mobilizations and convergences of interest between workers and entrepreneurs, processes of modernization and practices of exploitation. The phase of primitive accumulation accompanying Navense industrial development was founded on three central resources, all available at low cost: oil, scrap metal, and labor power. The oil boom fueled global construction expansion, turning rebar into a strategic raw material for post-war urban speculation (Pedrocco, 2000). Workers in the Navense ironworks operated within through what Melossi and Pavarini (2018) conceptualize as a disciplinary dispositif, aimed at the systematic extraction of surplus value through the rigid verticalization of power and the intensive exploitation of both human and non-human resources, aimed at the systematic extraction of surplus value through rigid verticalization of power and intensive exploitation of resources – human and non-human alike. The peasant-to-worker transition, far from linear, resulted in a labor force already accustomed to prolonged fatigue, available for exhausting shifts (up to 14-16 hours), and to forms of forced saving, such as the deposit of wages with the company, which allowed entrepreneurs to avoid bank indebtedness (Cucchini, 1985). One of the most significant peculiarities of the Navense context lies in the co-construction of a shared identity between the entrepreneuri-

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22. I dedicated to this ecological conflict path a specific contribution (Cavallotti, 2025a).

al class and the workforce: trade union documents from the period report forms of collaboration so close as to render union mediation ineffective (Pedrocco, 2000). Employer power was further legitimized through intense interconnection with political-administrative power, consolidating a productive hegemony founded on territorial relations and extra-local networks capable of guaranteeing extraordinary profit margins (Cucchini, 1985). Examples include both facilitation in obtaining building permits and the appropriation and private management of fundamental natural resources – water, energy, air – which were integrated into industrial capital. From a Marxian perspective, this strategy displaced power from labor to machinery, reorganizing production in ways that reduced workers' collective leverage while embedding control within the technical apparatus itself.

Nave can be read as a peculiar configuration of ecological conflict shaped by the stabilization of a steelmaking monoculture, within which low levels of trade union mobilization, a growing reliance on migrant labor, and the instrumental subordination of extra-human nature became mutually reinforcing elements. Rather than emerging as isolated outcomes, these traits were embedded in a broader territorial reorganization that, in the Garza Valley, took the form of an accelerated industrial expansion grounded in the treatment of space as an abstract and expendable resource. This reconfiguration generated severe and cumulative forms of environmental degradation across air, water, and soil, with direct repercussions on public health. Only at a later stage – when rising production costs and declining steel demand undermined the conditions of accumulation – intensified social conflict, prompting limited adjustments in industrial governance and marginal ecological remediation (Pedrocco, 2000). What is analytically significant, however, is that the local ecological regime was consolidated throughout the systematic neutralization of class-based antagonism by means of intimidation, co-optation (Abati, 2012), and the construction of extra-local political and economic alliances (Cucchini, 1985). In this sense, Nave functioned as an operational landscape (Brenner, 2016; Brenner and Katsikis, 2021): a space rendered functional to processes of valorization within a specific world-economy, and whose local ecology was reorganized accordingly. The complexity that capital persistently seeks to compress through acceleration and technical

rationalization remains structurally in excess, re-emerging in the form of crisis as a systemic feedback to accumulation-oriented simplification.

The path of the factory-city

The path of the workshop city, as it developed in Lumezzane from the early 20th century onwards, shared traits with both the path of rebar and the path of weapons – traits which, together with other original elements, combined in an entirely peculiar manner. As in the path of rebar, Lumezzane experienced a rather drastic transition, in terms of speed, quality, and scale, from a rural and economically impoverished society to an industrial district of extremely high economic concentration. To support this transformation, extensive and unregulated urbanization was deployed, that is, devoid of regulatory frameworks that might in any way hinder the miracle that was taking place: liberation from the yoke of subsistence. The collective block upon which this dynamic was grafted rested on two main factors: a community cohesive both morally and in its objective of escaping its previous historical condition; and a traditional familistic model that persisted within the new industrial trajectory. Part of this process entailed a prolonged assault on environmental matrices, especially water and soil, both of which were put to work within the productive circuit and later – technical evolution – saw their status degraded to that of waste spaces. At the same time, internal cohesion expressed itself through a monolithic political system that functioned – much like in the path of weapons – as a promoter of the collective interests generated by the early 20th century transformation. The overall saturation of available space, rather than of ecology per se, pushed local industrialists to respond to locational constraints by colonizing strategically relevant but external and distant spaces (the reverse trajectory experienced by the upper valley). Conversely, labor immigration compensated for workforce demand, particularly during the post-war productive push. Even more so than in other paths, the social front of ecological conflict – normally expected in large concentrations of workers – proved almost entirely absent.

The Lumezzane case allows me to articulate the historical experience of a context favorable to capitalist development, situating it within the

broader Valtrompia scenario. Drawing on Harvey's (2018) theoretical insights and reflecting on Moore's concept of the "Four Cheaps", it is possible – through the Lumezzanese experience – to extend this analytical framework by adding a fifth factor fundamental to capitalist organization: cheap space (Cavallotti, 2025c). The cornerstone of Lumezzane's landscape production lies in the period emerging in the 1950s, when the industrial city project, as theorized by Harvey (2018), found concrete manifestation in the Valgobbina factory-city. As Pasotti (2011) writes: «The Lumezzanese workshop city emerged when the market arrived in the Gobbia Valley: it was the moment when the market opened – a market without borders or limits – at the end of the Second World War» (p. 135). Re-read through our conceptual grid, this historical moment certifies Lumezzane's operationality and its «absolute dependence on the market» (*Ibidem*), which would govern its internal logics and thus its landscape. This landscape – having definitively detached itself from agricultural practice – could only assume the forms induced by industry, while having to graft itself onto a mountainous morphology. The possibility of responding immediately to the market by colonizing valley space was a crucial, propulsive factor, without which the foundations for accumulation likely could not have been laid: «The Gobbia Valley thus absorbed the massive impact (in many respects devastating) of this industrial colonization, up to the complete saturation of available spaces» (Ivi, p. 44). Lumezzane has been built upon a space that was fundamentally cheap: «The allocation (…) of available space to anything that did not yield maximum returns in productive, residential, or enterprise-supporting infrastructural terms was incomprehensible within the cultural outlook through which Lumezzane viewed things» (*Ibidem*), confirming that space functioned as a full-fledged ecological monoculture, with all possibilities confined within industrial productivism at any cost. The rationalization of landscape for accumulation is aimed at its space-time optimization, which is ultimately the construction of an environment upon which capitalism can anchor its productive process. Urbanization, in this sense, may serve to organize the division of labor, concentrate power within specific groups, accelerate transitions between production and consumption, or absorb capital and labor surpluses. In the latter case, resolving problems of overaccumulation and devaluation through urbanization means transferring them onto the physical and social land-

scape, which is profoundly shaped in its historical evolution (Harvey, 1998). According to this reading, such processes imply a prior or concomitant devaluation of the identified space, which becomes the site of new surpluses of capital and labor. In expansionary processes, as in periods of crisis, reducing not only the intrinsic value of space but also its social status appears necessary to defuse problems of overaccumulation – a tactic that constitutes part of the geographical restructuring of capital (the spatial fix. Harvey, 1998, p. 45). The landscape of a given space is reprogrammed following its socio-urban downgrading, a tactical operation embedded within a broader capitalist strategy of continuous search for cheap spaces, necessary to contain the destructive effects of its own structural crises (See also Moore, 2015, p. 95).

The evolution of ecological conflict in Val Gobbia reiterates several processes already experienced along the other paths. However, the presence of complicating factors such as the valley's morphology, its aggravated marginality as a lateral valley, and a less dynamic historical evolution compared, for instance, to the Gardonese area, has entailed an even more violent clash among natures. The study conducted in Val Gobbia hence revealed that the intensity of the conflict appears to be directly proportional to the historically experienced hostility between humans and the rest of nature along a given path of ecological conflict: the greater the presumption of environmental hostility, the greater the vigor of the human agent's response against other natures once the territory is subsumed within the capitalist regime. As we have seen, the inhabitants of Lumezzane lived in what they perceived as a hostile landscape. It is also clear that the broader context in which a given territory is embedded must be considered: where external processes unfold within an inertia of industrialization, the reference territory will display the adoption of equivalent practices through imitation and/or co-optation. Regarding this latter process, it is therefore necessary to include in the analysis the way the territory itself was co-opted into the capitalist regime. In the case of Lumezzane, starting from a condition of stasis based primarily on subsistence, co-optation occurred in a drastic and abrupt manner, since external demand was high; shortly thereafter, a world war would further amplify it exponentially (Pasotti, 2011). If, in an "archaic" phase, a relation of dependence existed between humans and non-humans, emancipation – or alienation – within a capitalist function accelerated the shift

in the former's posture toward the latter. A mutual reinforcement thus developed between the abandonment of reverential hostility toward other natures and the logic of productive maximization; the availability of cheap space then laid the foundations for capital development in a context ontologically favorable to it.

The path of the infinite city[23]

Concesio is a middle ground: for centuries the site of villas belonging to the Brescia nobility, endowed with an agricultural-zootechnical ecological system, until this was overwhelmed by industrial activities starting in the final decades of the 20th century. Subsequently, beginning in the 1960s, it assumed the form of an urban periphery, characterized by large commercial concentrations that absorb consumer demand from the city, fast-food chains, and other factories located here for reasons of spatial localization. Today, the agricultural landscape is residual. Moreover, Concesio represents the grafting of the urban into Valtrompia: that transitional space between what ought to end, the urban landscape, and what ought instead to begin, the mountain landscape typical of a pre-Alpine valley. The history of the path of the infinite city, as understood here, begins in the 1970s, when in 1972 «the first mega commercial settlement»[24] was opened in Concesio, at Via Europa 8: "La Rinascente Città Mercato". In September 2013, the forty-first anniversary of this "City-Market" was celebrated in Concesio, a sign that even today this event evokes a historic settlement for the territory – one capable of radically transforming the landscape while leaving a living trace in collective memory. The "revolution" – as described by Luciano Costa, a journalist for *Bresciaoggi*[25] present at the event – triggered by the City Market, marked the beginning of "the Brescia route to the supermarket", the «first sign of a commercial idea pushed to its maximum potential» (*Ibidem*). This premature example of shopping mall prefigured a reprogramming of geography – not only of capital, but of the urban itself – activating competition among

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23. The concept of "infinite city" here should be read as intended by Bonomi (2004).
24. Costa, L., 23 settembre 2013, *Quella città-mercato che ci cambiò la vita*, articolo di quotidiano, in «Bresciaoggi», last access: 2015-10-31.
25. A local newspaper.

neighboring municipalities, which perceived both the drastic effects of this transformation and the potential benefits their own territories might obtain, at the cost of severe and exponential losses should capital's choice fall outside their boundaries.

Bonomi highlights precisely this moment as the historical juncture in which what had been the periphery of the national system becomes a "strategic environment" where new horizontal conflicts emerge within the social composition, driven by the demands posed by the transforming urban – such as environmental protection and local identity – often overwhelmed by modernization processes that dissolved previous identities into mobile and dilated territorial systems (Bonomi, 1997, p. 72). The clash intensifies, as in Concesio, «between those who choose logics of openness among adjacent systems» (*Ibidem*) and those who instead «incorporate internationalization as a strategic alternative and therefore choose according to complementary networks» (*Ibidem*). These are the first grafts of what Pinson has defined as the neoliberal city: a transformation characterized by a global reorganization of the division of labor; moderate deindustrialization relative to the previous Fordist model; a general shift in employment structures and qualifications toward tertiarization; and a mutation of the city's socio-spatial morphology (Pinson, 2022). The latter constitutes a strategic organization of the urban to satisfy the «imperative of development» (Ivi, p. 47). It is constructed around assumptions according to which – given the increased mobility of capital – it is necessary to foster investment and competition over space to generate economic growth. For this reason, planning must guarantee «an attractive territorial offer» (*Ibidem*), responding to the continuous relocation requirements of capital. This can be achieved by freeing spaces from constraints and restrictions – rendering them, in other words, cheap – an operation that concerns not only economic value but above all governance and the cultural value assigned to space, juridically embodied in urban and building regulations. In doing so, «issues of spatial justice or optimal land use» are relegated «to the background» (*Ibidem*). A vicious circle is thus activated between urban development and commercial value – in Marxian terms, exchange value – whereby the former depends on the continuous increase of the latter. Even as purchasing power rises, urban policies are diverted away from market regulation and the implementation of an egalitarian urban welfare capable of guaranteeing spatial justice

(*Ibidem*). This occurs in favor of urban marketing, necessary to construct an image of the city as attractive as possible. Consequently, the neoliberal project encourages administrators to behave like entrepreneurs, adopting a managerial approach to public institutions, simplifying planning and design procedures that function instead as facilitations for development, outsourcing to private agencies, and promoting the implementation of large-scale urban projects (Pinson, 2022).

Concesio's operationality rapidly favors processes of *ecological peripheralization*. The traumatic speed that marked the transition from one ecology to another exerted a highly erosive force, of such intensity as to leave no room for possible alternatives. Moreover, it marks two points of no return: on the one hand, the occupation and consequent extensive consumption of land, exploiting flat morphology, spatial amplitude, and prior agricultural use to create cheap space; on the other hand, workers' dependence on capital and its reorganizations. Local administrations appear to have little regulatory or oppositional capacity in the face of these large-scale phenomena, which impact very small localities where conflict has historically been anesthetized. The role of operational landscapes ultimately requires such characteristics – especially in the hinterlands of regional urban systems or metropolises. These spaces are reconfigured and rendered operational, infrastructured and enclosed, to perform new roles within global supply chains and informational capitalism: as back-office sites and warehouses; as global laboratories; as agro-industrial territorial systems; as data storage facilities; as energy-generation networks; as resource extraction zones; as logistical hubs and transport corridors; as fuel depots or waste disposal areas (Brenner, 2019). Concesio has embarked – according to its own modes and temporalities – on this path: the path of the infinite city.

Conclusions

The five paths of ecological conflict constituted my theoretical device for analyzing the development of capitalism in the valley. Ecological peripheralization emerges as a major effect of this development and constitutes a central analytical focus of this article. The powerful spatialization of the industrialization process produced a specific territoriality – a pro-

cess that benefited both from a pre-existing productivist and extractivist humus, which allowed capital to graft itself onto a largely already accustomed human raw material, thus avoiding the need for forced or traumatic discipline; and from a longue durée that enabled industry to become a hegemonic structure, both material and discursive. Across the five paths, I have shown the convergence of locality production around industrial capital and the spaces it reproduces. The hypothesis of the factory as a disciplinary institution allowed me to locate the nodal points of power in the valley and to situate the process of institutionalization within the longue durée. Even if synthetically, the five paths problematized different modalities that can be reread both as behaviors intrinsic to capitalist logic and extended accumulation, and as physiological contradictions. Such were the practices of discipline or repression adopted by industrialists toward workers in the triumplian districts; the labor conditions prevailing in and around the factories analyzed in the cases of Nave and Lumezzane; the pursuit of profit achieved by lowering the value of productive factors and externalizing environmental and social costs, thereby aggravating the vulnerability of territories and communities; followed by repeated pollution of environmental matrices (air, water, soil), causing the progressive destruction of key ecosystems and biodiversity loss. So too are the negligent and predatory management of fauna – including systematic poaching or the creation of illegal markets for animal products; the degradation and/or privatization of landscape heritage; and the depletion of local communities.

In an organic attempt to conceptualize the practices reconstructed throughout the analysis, and drawing on critical criminological perspectives (Tittle, 1995; Piquero and Piquero, 2006; Ruggiero, 2013; 2020; Pemberton, 2015; Natali, 2019; Ferrajoli, 2022), I adopted the term *persistent ecological crime* (Cavallotti, 2025a) as a concept capable of synthesizing what was observed. Based on these historical trajectories, an interpretive hypothesis can be advanced: behaviors today qualified as deviant do not represent dysfunctional or external elements with respect to the prevailing order but rather configure themselves as structural effects of those same socio-ecological configurations that have produced the stabilization of the valley as an operational space. The persistence and recursivity of the ecological conflicts reconstructed here have in fact selected and normalized dispositifs of exploitation, forms of extractive rationality,

and regimes of legitimation of material domination – whose outcomes inscribe themselves within the social body also in the form of transgression, refusal, desertion, or violence. Valtrompia has shown that the study of a given territorial context allows us to observe the shared grammar of the world that underlies these modes of action within a territory. This is grounded in the fact that such actions were not always criminal acts, nor was the State – despite its claim to juridical monopoly within national borders and its role as both origin and endpoint of criminalization – the sole normative reference for communities and individuals. Actions that were lawful and socially accepted laid the cultural foundations for their own legitimacy, supported by an accommodating environment. In this sense, landscape has functioned as a privileged lens through which to observe forms of damage stratification: as a symbolic and political space in which thresholds of acceptable degradation are defined. From this perspective, landscape emerges as the material reflection of a hierarchy of harm, in which certain forms of degradation are naturalized while others are stigmatized. Integrating landscape into criminological and socio-ecological analysis thus allows us to move beyond a strictly normative reading of crime, grasping its broader implications for social structure and environmental risk perception.

Deviance is an endemic phenomenon in the life of a social system, whose self-preservation mechanisms act to stigmatize or criminalize practices deemed divergent from culturally constructed normality. If it is common to ask how a territory can be understood by reading and studying the crimes that occur within it, the terms might be reversed: why does studying a territory and the cycles of production (or territorialization) that shaped it, provide a useful lens for understanding phenomena such as deviance and its criminal variants? As observed, it is not sufficient to define the concept of deviance, contextualize it, or establish its place, time, and the social category to which stigma is assigned. What is required is the study of the metamorphosis of the cultural substratum that produced the normative conditions and institutions through which an act or behavior comes to be judged deviant with respect to the normal course of things. This implies defining the forces at play, the actors involved, and the role of individuals within the history of communities; it implies studying power and how it insinuates itself among bodies, between bodies and space. Deviance thus becomes a mirror of the tensions

and contradictions traversing a given historical phase of the capitalist mode of production, revealing the ways in which power disciplines bodies and spaces, hierarchies subjectivities and neutralizes forms of alterity and antagonism.

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The militarisation of protest policing through the criminalisation of protesters: explaining the relation between the liberal democratic Western state and its public
Maria Giulia Molinaro Vitale[1]

Introduction: reframing police militarisation

This paper posits that the process of criminalisation constitutes the primary mechanism through which the repressive relationship between state and protest is enacted and legitimised. Consequently, police militarisation is understood as both the physical and symbolic enactment of this criminalisation. The distinct contribution of this research, which synthesises ongoing doctoral work, lies in its deliberate shift in analytical perspective. Instead of examining militarisation from within the institutional framework of policing, this study critically analyses it from an external vantage point: specifically, through the lived experiences of protesters, who are identified as its primary targets. Within the analytical framework of this research, a crucial distinction is drawn between the concepts of criminalisation of protesters and the militarisation of the police (in protests). Criminalisation is understood in this paper as the deliberate, overarching process encompassing efforts to depoliticise, dehumanise, and obstruct protesters and their movements. This process functions as the fundamental mechanism through which the repressive relationship between authorities and protest movements is initiated and justified. Its essence lies in the ideological and discursive redefinition of legitimate dissent into unlawful, undesirable, or even dangerous behav-

iour. Conversely, militarisation is conceptualised as the subsequent, tangible manifestation of this criminalisation. It represents the physical and symbolic enactment of the criminalisation process within the context of protest management. This distinction implies that while criminalisation sets the stage by delegitimising protesters, militarisation provides the operational and visual means to enforce this delegitimisation. The deployment of militarised tactics, equipment, and postures by police forces during protests serves not only as a deterrent but also as a direct physical and symbolic embodiment of the narrative that protesters are inherently threatening, or criminal entities requiring an escalated, often military-style, response. Thus, militarisation is presented as the observable outcome and instrumental application of the underlying criminalising logic.

This article offers a conceptual and theoretical reassessment of police militarisation in protests. The sight of police forces equipped with military-grade hardware, deploying aggressive crowd-control tactics, and engaging in mass arrests has become a widely shared feature of social protests across Western liberal democracies. This phenomenon, broadly referred to as the "militarisation of policing", is often analysed as a recent escalation, a departure from a supposedly more benign model of policing by consent. Academic and public discourse typically centres on the material, cultural, and organisational dimensions of this shift, focusing on the adoption of military weaponry, the use of martial language and uniforms, and the proliferation of élite, specialised units like SWAT teams (Kraska, 2007). A second problem with the academic reading on militarisation lies in the fact that it has always been interpreted in its visible symptoms (weapons, hierarchy, vehicles, etc.), but never in its human and interpersonal dimension. While this framework, most influentially articulated by Peter Kraska, provides a crucial foundation for understanding the changing nature of law enforcement, it remains fundamentally incomplete. It describes the symptoms of militarisation but fails to capture its political essence and its profound implications for the relationship between the state and its public. A definition based on equipment, tactics, and training lacks two critical elements: the people it targets (that is, those used as justification for militarisation) and the people who benefit from it.

When facing a problem, in order to understand it one must look at those who benefit from that, and I apply this method to my research:

militarisation begins with investments, decrees, laws, agreements, alliances, and this is done by the political élite, so through an analysis of why those might have an interest in repressing protesters, dissent and protests (Stavro and Welch, 2024), I identify above-mentioned élites as being primarily responsible for the militarisation of police during protests. Furthermore, I support the idea that militarisation is one of the attitudes with which the state relates to its public. Within this statement I think that studying protests is particularly important as that is the occasion when the population exercises its right to democratic expression. Before going any further, a definition of research framework is necessary. The geographical, cultural and political focus are Western Countries (i.e. Western Europe, USA and Canada). As per the fieldwork the country chosen as case study is Italy, and the historical period is the 21st century. The reasons for these choices are as follows: although the countries on which theoretical research is developed are many and diverse, they have very similar lifestyles, which undoubtedly influence the development of dissent in both motivations and modes of expression. Moreover, they share similar problems, such as the housing crisis, re-rising of far right, strong immigration[2], etc. Also, many of these countries are part of alliances such as Schengen[3] and NATO, and they also share knowledge on protest policing, research on weapons, and personnel training manuals.

In this paper, as much as in the thesis, I argue that the militarisation of protest policing can better be understood not as a mere tactical or technological shift, but as the expression of an intrinsic, and often violent, relationship between the liberal democratic state and its public. This relationship is one of dialectical tension: a (neo)liberal democratic state requires a participatory citizenry, including the expression of dissent, to maintain its democratic legitimacy; simultaneously, to preserve the profits and interests of the state and its ruling élite, it resorts to a militarised police to contain and suppress these very manifestations of dissent when they pose a challenge to the established order (Cristiano *et al.*, 2023). The

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2. I would like to make it very clear that immigration itself is not a problem. The problem is the way in which this entirely natural, and in any case justifiable, phenomenon is handled by the ruling class, who assume a protectionist policy towards the very populations whose economy, ecosystem and culture they have destroyed. For further clarification, see the section on colonialism.

3. Another major instrument of European cooperation is the Schengen Information System, created by the Convention implementing the Schengen Agreement, which provides the police services of member States with information on activists (Mailfait, 2002, p. 627).

central argument of this paper is that the process of *criminalisation* – the deliberate effort to depoliticise, dehumanise, and obstruct protesters and their movements – serves as the primary mechanism through which this repressive relationship is enacted and justified. Militarisation, therefore, is the physical and symbolic enactment of criminalisation. The novelty of this research, which synthesises a doctoral thesis in progress, lies in its deliberate shift in analytical perspective. Rather than examining militarisation from within the police institution, it seeks to understand it from the outside, through the eyes of the protesters who are, according to this research, its primary targets. This approach allows us to see militarisation not as an isolated institutional glitch but as a form of state communication – a systematic, organised, and institutionalised mode of violent repression (both potential and actual) that defines the boundaries of acceptable political discourse and its methods. This will clearly emerge in the thesis as a dangerous abuse of the state's monopoly on violence.

From repression to criminalisation

To understand the dynamics of militarised policing, one must first delineate the conceptual field in which it operates. The interaction between protesters and the state can be framed by two core concepts: dissent and repression. Dissent, from the Latin *dis-sensus* ("to feel differently"), represents the foundational sentiment of democratic debate – the articulation of a divergent opinion. However, in the context of modern democracies, dissent is usually perceived not as a contribution to public discourse but as a potential threat to the stability of the ruling class and its interests (Selmini and Ronco, 2023, p. 30) and, a disruption to normal life of other people using the public space[4]. Repression, in turn, is the set of actions organised by a political authority to discipline or suppress social protests and manifestations of dissent that are perceived as bad for the liberal stability of the public space and the economic interests for the state. It is a mechanism for the suppression of dissent, functioning both in the short term, by physically preventing a protest, and in the long term, by creating

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4. I identify this negative sentiment on protests by other citizens as a successful criminalisation of protesters: those who participate in protests are seen by other members of the community as lazy, selfish and *wealthy bored kids*. It is evident that this description is as inaccurate as it is widespread.

a chilling effect that discourages future participation among the wider community (Echeverría and Calvo, 2023, pp. 426-433).

Repression is a rather broad and complex topic, in this paper as in the thesis I simply clarify that it acts in different ways depending on who is supposed to receive the message of repression. This means that repression works on a direct level – police violence in protests serves the protester to discourage them from participating again – but also on an indirect level: the viewer of the news or social media at home must understand that this behaviour is not acceptable, and that by protesting they are "lowering" themselves to the same level of a criminal – and as such must be violently punished. Such repression, if carefully justified, leads to an increasing demand for security from some members of the community, who therefore agree to give up some of their freedoms in order to get even more armed, and thus violent, police. It is evident here how public opinion that follows state propaganda is encouraged by the government, which only uses it to justify less democratic means of running a society: honest citizens who go to work and do not protest demand more security, and the government pretends to listen to them to maintain the democratic theatre, while making their interests. This relationship of power between political authorities and the public is represented also through various forms of repression, from direct legislative and physical interventions to indirect methods involving the manipulation of media narratives or the gradual habituation of a community to state control. Within this broader framework of repression, criminalisation emerges as a distinct and highly sophisticated political strategy. As we have just seen, it is a process that seeks to transform protesters, activists, and political opponents into veritable criminals in the eyes of the state and the public, exploiting the full spectrum between existence, ideas, and actions (Cristiano *et al.*, 2023). This process is not merely about punishing illegal acts committed during a protest; it is about fundamentally reframing the nature of protest itself. It involves a set of intersecting strategies that can be categorised as legislative, expansionary, and rhetorical.

Legislative criminalisation is the most formal and visible mechanism, involving the exploitation of the criminal justice system and legislative power to repress and discourage dissent (Gulliver *et al.*, 2023, pp. 47-48). This is achieved by creating new criminal offences or by expanding the scope of existing ones to encompass protest activities. Often, laws

are drafted with vague and ambiguous definitions of concepts like "public disorder", "public safety ", or "threat to national security", granting authorities wide discretionary power to criminalise protesters under anti-terrorism and anti-organised crime laws a broad range of activities, including non-violent civil disobedience. The UK's *Public Order Act* of 1986, and its more recent successor, the *Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022*, serve as prime examples. The 2022 Act introduced the offence of causing «serious annoyance» or «serious inconvenience» (UK Public General Acts 2022, p. 85), a definition so broad that, as Joanna Gilmore notes, «it's difficult to envisage any protest which would not fall foul of these definitions» (Cristiano *et al.*, 2023, p. 1). This form of criminalisation directly equates peaceful protest with criminal behaviour, reinforcing it with severe penalties such as hefty fines and imprisonment, thereby creating a powerful deterrent.

Expansionary criminalisation, also referred to as *de facto* or informal criminalisation, operates more subtly. This is the criminalisation the research focuses on. It occurs when state agencies, particularly the police, enforce existing laws more aggressively and interpret vague laws more expansively in repressive ways (Gulliver *et al.*, 2023, p. 5). This is not about changing the law but about changing how the law is enforced on the ground, and the process of militarisation falls perfectly under this change. It manifests through the discretionary use of police power, such as obstructing protesters' access to public spaces, the use of containment tactics like kettling, and the deployment of excessive force (Wood, 2014). A crucial aspect of this process is the ideological training of police personnel: as Fabini, Gargiulo, and Tuzza demonstrate, «police training manuals often rely on outdated and pseudoscientific crowd theories, such as those of Gustave Le Bon, which portray crowds as inherently irrational and dangerous» (Fabini, Gargiulo, Tuzza, 2023, p.20). This education ensures that officers do not perceive their actions as a political criminalisation of dissent, but as a necessary, technical response to a potential threat that perfectly falls into the 'to protect and to serve' motto of law enforcements. Protesters are not seen as citizens exercising a democratic right, but as a mob susceptible to a «temporary insanity» (Bürger, Herold, and Lee, 2023, p. 3). In this universe, the protester is, by definition, already a potential criminal, indeed in the aforementioned personnel training manual, *Public Order Policing*, under the guise of technical language,

protesters are referred with terms such as «criminal protesters», «criminals protesting», «offenders», «antisocial offenders«, «provocateurs», «agitators» (Bürger, Herold, and Lee, 2023). There is no criminalisation process because the protester is in their very definition a criminal. In this universe the police play a moral role in the community, rather than a repressive one, so that any attack on the police is not only a risk to the physical integrity of the police officers (which the manual focuses on, e.g. explaining the danger of toy lasers that protesters might point at the eyes of officers), but is also a threat to the moral duty of authority itself (Bürger, Herold, and Lee, 2023).

Rhetorical criminalisation complements the legislative and expansionary forms by operating on the level of discourse and social perception. It is a narrative process through which protesters are systematically portrayed as dangerous, anti-social, and deviant figures, using labels such as terrorists, vandals, extremists, and thugs (Vegh Weis, 2022, pp. 19-29). This is achieved through the strategic use of language and imagery by politicians, media outlets, and other cultural producers. The goal is to strip protesters of their political legitimacy, separating them from their demands and working on the stereotypes of mobs. This process of depoliticisation is also a form of dehumanisation, constructing dichotomies between the civilised public and the uncivilised protester, which in turn justifies repressive police interventions in the public mind (Cristiano *et al.*, 2023). The biggest example of rhetoric criminalisation is with no doubt the term eco-terrorism. This term was deliberately popularised to discredit environmental movements and activists, framing their actions not as political statements and comprehensible concerns but as threats to the security of the public[5]. As is clear now, by shaping public opinion, rhetorical criminalisation creates the social and political conditions

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5. The term gained popularity from an article by Ron Arnold of February 1983 in the *Reason Magazine*, a libertarian publication with a clear bias against left-wing activism. Arnold was an anti-environmental activist and in 1987 he founded the Free Enterprise Press writing a series of books on the environmental movement. His *EcoTerror* was included in the *100 Best Nonfiction Books of the 20th Century Modern Library Reader*'s List. He is considered the father of the Wise Use movement, launched in 1988, which promoted the expansion of private property rights and the reduction of government regulation of natural resource use. In 1988, Arnold became Vice-President of the Center for the Defense of Free Enterprise, which gathers together the largest logging companies in the USA. To this day, there is a page on the centre's website dedicated to ecoterrorism and the need for tougher action by the authorities against environmental activists.

necessary for the state to implement and justify more formal modes of repression[6].

The anatomy of militarised policing

The concept of police militarisation, as conventionally understood, describes the process whereby civilian police increasingly adopt the material loadout and equipment, cultural habits and thinking, and operational approach of the military. Peter Kraska's (2007) seminal work identifies four key dimensions of this phenomenon: the material, encompassing advanced weaponry and equipment; the cultural, involving martial language and army etiquette, style, and ideology; the organisational, seen in the rise of hierarchical squads like SWAT teams; and the operational, which includes activities modelled after military intelligence and high-risk interventions. This framework provides a valuable taxonomy of the "symptoms" of militarisation, allowing us to identify and measure the extent to which a police force has moved along a continuum from a civilian to a military model. However, to fully grasp the political significance of this trend, particularly in the context of protest, we must look beyond the institution itself and consider the effects of these changes on the policed population. Militarisation is not merely an internal organisational shift; it is a strategy of social control with profound consequences for civil liberties and the nature of democratic engagement.

The material dimension is the most visible aspect of militarised policing. Western law enforcement agencies have progressively expanded their arsenals to include a range of less-lethal weapons, a problematic term in itself since it was only created to label certain weapons and not to set limits in the rules of engagement and production of those weapons. These include chemical irritants like OC spray (pepper spray) and CS gas (tear gas), which can cause severe respiratory distress, vomiting, and

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6. The environmentalist movement Ultima Generazione is at the centre of the new laws aiming at criminalising protesters. The movement is known for their non-violent methods that include roadblocks and using orange paint to call out people, governments and companies that are a danger to the community. In the Piantedosi Security Law – passed in Italy in 2025 and costing the nation a place on the CIVICUS watchlist for declining democracies – there are specific references to the protest method of the roadblock.

even death in vulnerable individuals (Wood, 2023). Conducted Energy Devices (CEDs), such as the Taser, deliver powerful electric shocks and have been linked to hundreds of deaths, leading the UN to classify them as instruments of torture (Amnesty International, 2012). Long-Range Acoustic Devices (LRADs), or sound cannons, developed for the military, can emit sound waves powerful enough to cause permanent hearing damage and other physical ailments (Stavro and Welch, 2024, p. 971). Furthermore, the use of explosive devices like flash-bang grenades, designed to disorient, water cannons, and kinetic impact projectiles such as rubber or plastic bullets, which have a long and bloody history in colonial counterinsurgency, has become increasingly common at protests.

This proliferation of military-grade hardware transforms the visual landscape of protest, creating an environment of intimidation and fear very close to a warfare simulation. The operational and tactical dimensions of militarisation are equally significant. Police training has shifted to incorporate military-style drills and simulations that often presuppose violent confrontation. As Kretschmann (2023, pp. 240-242) observes and clearly demonstrates, these training scenarios almost exclusively represent protests as left-wing and inherently violent, thereby subtly instilling a warrior mindset in officers, making them erase the distinction between policing and combat. This mindset is reflected in the tactics deployed on the streets. For instance, the practice of kettling consists in trapping protesters in a confined space most of the cases for hours, depriving them of basic necessities and freedom of movement, a practice deemed as a form of collective punishment and a form of torture. Pre-emptive arrests are used to decapitate movements by targeting organisers before a protest even begins, blatantly infringing the right to assembly (Wood, 2023). The use of mass arrests, often for minor infractions as it happens to those who do not leave the public space immediately after the protest, serve to disrupt protests and impose significant legal and financial costs on participants. These tactics are underpinned by a logic of strategic incapacitation which aims not to manage a crowd but to pre-emptively neutralise its political potential (Noakes and Gillham, 2014). This shift towards a militarised posture is often justified by police and political authorities as a necessary response to a new, more dangerous breed of protester. However, this justification crumbles under scrutiny. The framing of protesters as a threat is a political construction in both violent and non-violent

situations – it must not be forgotten that, according to the police, every protest is violent (Bürger, Herold, and Lee, 2023). As the next section will explore, the roots of this warrior policing model do not lie in the contemporary challenges of protest management, but in the long and brutal history of colonial domination. The militarisation of domestic policing is not a new phenomenon, but as Julian Go brilliantly shows, the importation of empire's policing.

Colonial legacy of modern policing

To comprehend the deep-seated nature of militarised policing in Western democracies, it is essential to look beyond the post-9/11 security earthquake and trace its genealogy back to the colonial era[7]. The aggressive, racialised, and militarised policing that characterises the state's response to dissent today is not a modern invention but the result of what Aimé Césaire termed the «boomerang effect» (Go, 2024, pp. 17-19): the process by which the brutal techniques of colonial domination are brought back into the country's borders and deployed within the imperial metropole itself (Go, 2024). Modern civil policing, far from being an institution designed to protect a universal citizenry, was born from and shaped by the imperatives of empire, created to manage and control racialised colonial subjects. Its militaristic character is not an incidental feature but is inscribed in its very DNA, and only changes as far as it has to update its military apparatus. The establishment of the London Metropolitan Police in 1829, often hailed as the birth of modern civil policing, was a direct response to the perceived threat posed by Irish immigrants. As England's first major internal colony, Ireland served as a laborato-

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7. I want to specify that the colonial era is not over, still nowadays the foreign policies of Western countries are neo-colonial policies. Still today Western European countries take resources from African countries (Chansa and Thelma *et al.*, 2024), still today Western European companies that invest in Africa reduce the population to slavery (Modern Slavery in Africa, 2025), take control of natural water resources to maximise companies' profits (War on Want, 2007), exploit charities for 'Africa' for companies' profit (Oxfam, 2015). Even today, cocoa companies like Nestlé, Ferrero and many other (Sustainalytics, 2024) exploit child labour in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire to maximise their profits (ILO and UNICEF 2025) (Sadhu *et al.*, 2020). When reference is made in the text to the colonial era and colonial empires, it is assumed that the actual colonies ended in the 1960s, but in no way does the author want to assume that the exploitation of former colonial and poor countries is something that ended and it's now history.

ry for coercive techniques. The English colonial state developed militarised police forces like the Peace Preservation Force and then Royal Irish Constabulary, which were explicitly designed to suppress Irish resistance and maintain a racialised order. These forces, armed and organised along military lines, provided the template for the London Met. Its founders, Robert Peel and Charles Rowan, were men with extensive experience in colonial administration and military campaigns in Ireland and the West Indies. They imported not only the organisational structures, such as the hierarchical division and beat patrol system (a tactic originating from slave patrols in the Caribbean), but also a colonial mindset that equated the Irish working class in London with the savage natives of the colonies (Go, 2024). The police was created to manage a racialized threat, and its methods reflected this origin.

This imperial boomerang effect continued as the model of civil policing spread across the Atlantic. The formation of police departments in USA cities like New York and Savannah in the mid-19th century was fuelled by anxieties over the transatlantic subproletariat of cotton colonialism: enslaved Africans and impoverished Irish immigrants. In the American South, the legacy of slave patrols directly informed the creation of heavily armed, mounted police forces designed to enforce a brutal racial hierarchy. The Savannah Police Department, for instance, was explicitly more militarised than its northern counterparts, a direct reflection of the perceived threat from its large mixed population of enslaved people and Irish labourers (*Ibidem*). The tools, tactics, and racialized logic of colonial coercion were thus embedded in American policing from its inception. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a new wave of police militarisation in the USA, driven by the country's expansion into an overseas colonial empire in the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. This period, often mischaracterised as an era of professionalisation, saw the importation of brutal counterinsurgency techniques. The infamous water cure, a form of torture used by the US Army to extract information from Filipino insurgents, was brought back and used by police departments in cities like Chicago on African American detainees. August Vollmer, the celebrated father of modern policing, was a veteran of the Philippine-American War who systematically applied his counterinsurgency experience to policing in Berkeley and Los Angeles. He introduced innovations such as mobile patrol units, crime mapping (pin

mapping), and intelligence divisions, all of which were direct adaptations of military tactics used to track and suppress colonial rebels (Go, 2024). This reform was, in reality, a process of domesticating overseas imperial violence, aimed at managing the new racialized threats posed by Asian, African American, and European immigrants.

The cycle repeated itself in Britain during the decline of its empire in the 1960s and 1970s. Faced with global anticolonial insurgency and rising dissent from Black Caribbean immigrant communities at home, the British state turned to its colonial counterinsurgency playbook. The London Metropolitan Police's Special Patrol Group, established in 1965, was transformed into a domestic counterinsurgency unit, trained in tactics developed in colonial battlegrounds like Malaya, Kenya, and the North of Ireland. The SPG employed colonial methods such as snatch squads to arrest protest leaders and saturation tactics like stop-and-search to harass and over-monitor Black communities, effectively turning London's racialised neighbourhoods into occupied territories (*Ibidem*). This aggressive policing provoked the very insurgencies it was meant to suppress, culminating in the 1981 Brixton Riots. The state's response was not to de-escalate but to double down, equipping police forces across the country with tear gas, plastic bullets, and armoured vehicles – tools of colonial warfare used for the first time on the British mainland.

The paradox of dissent in liberal democracies

The historical trajectory of protest policing reveals a deep and enduring paradox at the heart of the liberal democratic state. On one hand, the legitimacy of such a state is predicated on the idea of popular sovereignty and the protection of fundamental rights, including the freedom of expression, assembly, and dissent. Liberalism's own founding myths are rooted in romanticised narratives of rebellion against tyranny (Cristiano *et al.*, 2023, pp. 14-15). Consequently, the state requires the visible performance of protest to affirm its democratic credentials and distinguish itself from authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, the neoliberal order that underpins contemporary Western democracies is fundamentally committed to the preservation of capital and the interests of an economic (and political) élite. When dissent moves beyond symbolic performance

and genuinely challenges this order – by disrupting commerce, questioning property relations, or exposing systemic injustices – the state reveals its coercive face. This is the dialectical tension: the state approves the possibility of dissent, but only in a managed, sanitised, and ultimately impotent form. The criminalisation of protesters and militarisation of protest policing are the primary mechanisms for managing this tension. They function to draw a line between legitimate and illegitimate dissent, between the good protester and the bad criminal. This line is not drawn based on the legality or violence of protesters' actions, but on the perceived threat they pose to the status quo. It is interesting, as noted in the thesis, that the protesters play a minimal role in deciding policing strategies, whereas the interests and investments of the political class, the commissioner and prefect, have much more relevance. Looking at it from this point of view, it almost seems that the public does not matter in the eyes of the political class or for the militarisation process itself.

As Wacquant (2009) argues, the shrinking of the welfare state has been accompanied by the expansion of the penal state. The punitive management of poverty and social marginality extends to the management of political dissent. Public space needs to be increasingly sanitised and redesigned to serve the interests of commerce and consumption, making it hostile to the disruptive presence of protest (Selmini and Ronco, 2023)[8]. Furthermore, the logic of neoliberalism, which prioritises efficiency and risk management, aligns perfectly with the intelligence-led, pre-emptive models of policing that treat protest as a threat to be neutralised rather than a right to be facilitated. In this context, repression becomes cheaper than accommodation; it is more cost-effective for the state to invest in riot gear and surveillance technology than to address the root causes of social unrest (Stavro and Welch, 2024). The colonial legacy adds another crucial layer to this analysis. The racialised othering used to support imperial domination abroad provides a ready-made template for managing dissent at home. As Julian Go (2024) powerfully argues, the techniques of colonial counterinsurgency were developed to control

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8. Also falling under this category of "disruptive presence" are the homeless, the unemployed, beggars, anyone who lives the public space according to customs and traditions different from the liberal Western ones, pickpockets and small criminals, ethnic and religious minorities. As proof of this, as if all the literature on the subject were not enough, it is enough to note the hostile architecture that anyone reading this article from one of the countries of the study can see in their own city.

populations deemed racially inferior and inherently disorderly. When these techniques are brought back to the metropole via the imperial boomerang, they are invariably deployed against those communities that are already racialised and marginalised. This is why the policing of Black, Brown, Indigenous, and immigrant communities (depending on if the state is a settler state like Canada or USA or a colonial state like Belgium or Denmark) so often resembles the policing of a colonial territory. The state's response to protest is not always the same: it is differentiated along racial and class lines, and political affiliations. The very definition of what constitutes order and disorder, is filtered through a colonial lens that sees racialised bodies as inherently suspect and threatening.

Fieldwork and case study: Italy as a critical nexus for understanding criminalisation and protest policing militarisation

This research project necessitates a robust empirical component. While the theoretical framework provides a crucial lens through which analyse these phenomena, the nuances of lived experience and the complexities of state-citizen interaction demand direct empirical investigation. To this end, an intensive fieldwork initiative, constituting approximately 90% of the thesis's original empirical contribution, has been designed. This extensive qualitative undertaking will focus on Italy as a paradigmatic case study, offering a uniquely fertile ground for exploring the research question: "what is, from the point of view of the protesters, the impact of militarisation, and therefore also criminalisation, in the relation between the state and its public?". Italy presents a compelling and illustrative case for examining this multifaceted relationship, particularly concerning the policing of dissent in the 21st century. The selection of Italy is grounded in a confluence of socio-political, historical, legal, and operational factors that render it an ideal site for in-depth qualitative inquiry within the broader context of Western European democracies. Firstly, Italy's socio-political landscape is marked by significant social inequalities and a vibrant, diverse ecosystem of protest actors, including a wide spectrum of movements, collectives, and unions that regularly engage in public demonstrations to articulate grievances and demands. Investigating the dynamics of repression within such a context allows for

a rich understanding of how state power is exerted in response to varied forms of collective action. Secondly, Italy possesses a rich and complex history of dissent and protest, providing a profound historical backdrop against which contemporary policing practices can be understood. This history encompasses the tumultuous periods of violent protests from the 1960s to the 1980s, often referred to as the Anni di piombo. While these eras are distinct, their legacy continues to influence the state's approach to public order.

More recently, Italy has witnessed a wide array of protest typologies, including sustained environmental movements such as the No-TAV and No-TAP. The country has also been a significant arena for anti-globalization demonstrations, notably the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa, and has seen the strategic adoption of black block tactics during the financial crisis that lead to the 2008 protests. Recent protest movements such as the Ultima Generazione non-violent actions underscore a continuous and evolving culture of protest, including cultural resistance actions and occupations. This dynamic history provides a fertile ground for studying the state's repressive apparatus in varied contexts. Thirdly, the Italian legal and public order framework offers specific insights into the mechanisms of control. The Italian Constitution enshrines the right to manifest, yet this right is continually navigated against public order legislation. A series of legislative measures, including the Security Law 1660 (also known as the Piantedosi Bill, approved in 2025), the Security Law of 2017, Salvini Decree 1/2018, and Salvini Decree 2/2019, have progressively shaped the legal landscape governing public assembly and dissent. These legislative developments, coupled with the particularities of the Italian public order maintenance system, which comprises different police forces such as the Guardia di Finanza, Polizia di Stato, and Carabinieri, offer a nuanced understanding of state control. Furthermore, the historical legacy of Italian colonisation in Africa and its connection to the criminalisation of colonised peoples provides an additional layer of complexity, suggesting that some tactics used today may have historical roots in colonial policing, influencing contemporary approaches to dissent.

The fieldwork will employ a qualitative research design, central to which are semi-structured interviews and direct observation of protest events. This methodological choice is deliberate, aimed at capturing the richness and complexity of lived experiences that quantitative approaches

might overlook. A core component of the fieldwork will involve conducting semi-structured interviews with individuals who have participated in protests across Italy. The selection of interviewees will prioritise diversity in terms of their political affiliations and motivations for engaging in dissent. This includes participants from student movements, and other major political movements both left-wing and right wing. For privacy reasons, specific organisational names will not be disclosed in this article; however, their general political alignment and the specific motivations for their involvement in protest will be meticulously documented. The primary rationale for interviewing these diverse individuals is to gather firsthand accounts of their encounters with militarised protest policing and their experiences of criminalisation, providing the human dimension this research is seeking. This approach allows the research to move *outside* the police, providing an external perspective on militarisation and its impact on the state-public relation. Complementing the interviews, direct observation of protest events across various Italian cities will be undertaken. This will involve both participant and non-participant observation, depending on the nature of the protest and the possibility to have access granted. The observation will systematically document the tactics and equipment employed by police forces, the behavioural responses of protesters, and the nature of interactions between state agents and demonstrators. It will also capture the spatial dynamics of the protest, including crowd control techniques and the enforcement of public order laws in practice. Attention will be paid to instances of expansionary criminalisation, where organisational protocols and police discretionary power are altered to modify how powers are applied, including the obstruction of access to public spaces or the use of excessive force. Similarly, the observation will seek to identify how rhetorical criminalisation might manifest through official statements or media narratives surrounding protests, as well as the overall atmosphere and unfolding of events, particularly how a gathering might escalate or be perceived as a violent situation.

The chosen qualitative methodology for this research is not merely a preference but it adds to the originality of the work and is a necessity for achieving the required depth that this project is looking to accomplish. It addresses critical gaps in existing scholarship and directly supports the theoretical underpinnings of the research. This methodological choice directly addresses the academic gap identified in the literature: much of

the influential work tends to focus on the inside of the police, analysing equipment, tactics, and training. While valuable, this lone perspective often overlooks the crucial aspect of the population it targets. By focusing on how this affects the state-public relationship from the point of view of the people participating in the protests, this fieldwork provides a vital counter-narrative and a comprehensive understanding of militarisation in its broader societal dimension. Thirdly, the qualitative design is uniquely suited to incorporate a feminist view of *bodies moving in a public space*, a crucial dimension currently lacking in the existing research. Through interviews, individuals can articulate how police tactics and criminalisation disproportionately affect certain bodies, experiences, and identities within the public sphere. Observation can corroborate how these dynamics play out in physical spaces, offering empirical evidence for theoretical claims about gendered or otherwise marginalised experiences of repression. Finally, the empirical insights gained from these interviews will contribute significantly to understanding the abuse of the state's monopoly on violence and its potential to foster a more violent society through the normalisation of organised and industrialised violence. This qualitative inquiry is thus not just about mapping patterns of repression but about exploring the profound societal implications of militarized policing and criminalization from the ground up, providing a critical empirical foundation for future theoretical advancements.

Conclusion: the protester's gaze and the future of dissent

This article has sought to redefine the militarisation of protest policing, moving beyond a narrow focus on institutional characteristics to understand it as a political strategy of repression rooted in the criminalisation of dissent. By tracing its origins to the colonial project and analysing its function within the paradoxical logic of liberal democracy, we see that militarised policing is not a recent or exceptional phenomenon. It is a core feature of the modern state's relationship with its inhabitants, a relationship marked by a constant tension between the need for democratic legitimacy and the imperative to protect the capitalistic wealthy élite's interests. The militarised police force is the ultimate arbiter of this tension, the physical embodiment of the state's capacity for organised,

institutionalised, and racialised violence. The primary innovation of this research is its methodological and theoretical commitment to understand this dynamic from the perspective of the protesters themselves. It is their experience – of being kettled, tear-gassed, arrested, and labelled as criminals – that reveals the true nature of state power. The protester's gaze cuts through the state's rhetoric of public safety and order management to expose the raw, coercive reality of a policing model designed to manage, contain, and neutralise political opposition. This perspective is not merely an alternative viewpoint; it is an epistemologically privileged one, for it is in the interaction between the police and the protester that the abstract power of the state becomes concrete and tangible.

The implications of this analysis are profound. If militarisation is an intrinsic feature of the liberal democratic state, then calls for reform that focus solely on police training, equipment, or oversight are destined to fail. Such reforms may temper the most egregious excesses, but they do not address the underlying political logic that drives the repressive apparatus. Meaningful change requires a much deeper challenge to the structures of power that militarised policing serves to protect: the inequalities of neoliberal capitalism and the enduring legacies of colonialism and racism. The future of dissent in Western democracies hinges on our collective ability to recognise and resist the processes of criminalisation. This requires building broad-based movements that can challenge the state's narrative, reject the false dichotomy between good and bad protesters, and forge solidarity across different struggles. It means understanding that the fight against police brutality in marginalised communities and the fight to protect the right to protest are one and the same. As the state continues to refine its strategies of control, from the deployment of new surveillance technologies to the enactment of ever more draconian anti-protest laws, the task of activists, scholars, and all who value democratic freedom is to expose the violence at the heart of the liberal order and to build a politics of resistance that is as sophisticated, and determined as the system it opposes.

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Political militancy and imprisonment in recent Chilean history: authoritarianism, testimonies and resistance from a feminist perspective
Claudia Spagnulo[1]

Introduction

In the field of humanities and social sciences, the topic of gender-based violence presupposes the possibility of adopting several possible theoretical approaches. In this article, I intend to embrace a feminist and decolonial approach.

Early Chilean historical accounts that addressed violence against women and other subjectivities tended to explain both domestic and public forms of abuse through factors such as poverty, alcoholism, or the broader «cuestión social» (Toro, 1967; Vidal, 1972). This interpretative framework began to shift in the early 1980s, when a feminist movement opposed to gender-based violence, human rights violations and the military dictatorship (1973-1990) gained visibility and coherence. In *Ser política en Chile* (1986), Julieta Kirkwood articulated a decisive connection between patriarchal authoritarianism and gendered violence across both private and public spheres. Her powerful call for «La democracia en el país y en la casa» became a central proposition for addressing gender-based violence structurally.

In 1985, Ximena Bunster-Burotto published a seminal study examining the ties between patriarchal authoritarianism and what she termed the «esclavitud sexual» of female political prisoners in Chile's centres of detention and torture. Her work stands among the earliest attempts to analyse torture under the dictatorship from an explicitly feminist and

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gendered perspective (Hiner, 2019). A few years later, in 1994, Edda Gaviola, Sandra Palestro, and Eliana Largo released *Una historia necesaria: Mujeres en Chile: 1973-1990*, one of the first studies to employ feminist oral history to investigate the multiple forms of gender-based violence enacted during the regime.

Over time, scholarly attention to militant women and former political prisoners expanded significantly, particularly after the publication of Tamara Vidaurrázaga's *Mujeres en rojo y negro* (2007) and Cherie Zalaquet's *Chilenas en armas* (2009). Parallel to this academic development, a growing number of testimonies by women who survived detention and torture began to circulate. These accounts describe their political activism, the gendered and political violence they endured and the many strategies of resistance they forged, during imprisonment and later through participation in feminist collectives, political movements and parties (Carrillo, 2012; Centro Cultural por la Memoria La Monche, 2015). In recent years, feminist historians such as Hillary Hiner, Gina Inostroza, and Brandi Townsend have broadened the field further. Their work explores militancy, violence, and resistance from new angles, incorporating regional histories, analyses of masculinity, and research on queer and racialised militants and survivors (Hiner, 2009; 2015a; 2015b; 2016a; 2016b; Hiner and Castro, 2018; Hiner and Garrido, 2019; Inostroza, 2017; Townsend, 2018; 2019).

In this article, the analysis will focus on the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR)[2], on the forms of oppression imposed on female bodies in detention and torture centers, but above all on the forms of resistance and the development of feminist consciousness among the imprisoned militants. This article emerges from the desire to contribute to a broader collective reconsideration of how women and other subjectivities actively shaped political life, rather than appearing solely as victims of the Chilean military dictatorship. This concern aligns with contemporary feminist approaches that adopt an intergenerational outlook, stressing the need to bridge understandings between groups that have lived through

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2. The Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR) is a Chilean Marxist-Leninist and Guevarist socio-political organization, founded in August 1965, initially as a guerrilla political-military organization under the leadership of the physician and politician Miguel Enríquez. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the MIR operated as a vanguard movement representing sectors of workers and peasants.

profoundly different political and identity formations. The distance separating the Revolutionary Left Movement of the 1960s (Vezzetti and Carnevale, 2009) from the generations raised after the dictatorship makes it difficult to grasp how political militancy became a central component of identity for women, other subjectivities and men who voluntarily committed themselves to armed revolutionary struggle. Reconstructing the meaning of political militancy during the 1960s and 1970s is especially complex in the context of the MIR, founded in 1965 as an alternative to the institutional left's focus on electoral strategies (Morales Llaña, 2015).

Approaching the memories of MIR militants who experienced repression and resistance during the dictatorship from a historical-political perspective that moves beyond the conventional hero/victim dichotomy opens an entirely new set of questions. How did individuals subjected to extreme repression manage to reorganise and continue participating in resistance? How did MIR militants come to understand patriarchal systemic structures inside and outside the MIR in their feminist struggle during their imprisonment?

Such reflections become difficult when one uncritically accepts the dominant victimisation framework through which the dictatorship has often been narrated, or when one adopts the opposite interpretative model that transforms former victims into heroic figures of the revolution. The suggestion by Oberti and Pittaluga (2006, p. 91) «no buscar arrancar del olvido a las mujeres que participaron de estas experiencias, para colocarlas en un panteón junto a los héroes, sino que recuperar los gestos más sutiles, aquellos más difícilmente representables» encourages the reconstruction of memories and historical accounts attentive to subtle, often unrepresentable gestures. These perspectives make it possible to revisit the contemporary relevance and enduring legacy of these political practices in the societies they continue to shape.

At the same time, narratives that foreground the resistance experiences of women and other subjectivities, from armed struggle to clandestine life and imprisonment, play a crucial role in building collective memory. Formed in the present, such narratives help construct shared representations of the past, contribute to the shaping of social identities, and embed these identities within a broader process of historical continuity and meaning (Traverso, 2007).

Gender, political militancy in the MIR and repression during the dictatorship

The introduction of gender as an analytical category within specific historical settings (Montecino, 1996) helped reveal how women and other subjectivities had long been framed as passive figures positioned on the axis of domination, portrayed primarily as victims of an unequal social order and a sex/gender system that rendered them vulnerable. Montecino's notion of *analytical invisibility* underscores the absence of adequate conceptual and methodological tools to grasp the mechanisms of gendered power relations in history. Her work encourages us to ground gender analysis in concrete historical configurations, so as to capture social and cultural transformations in their full complexity and interconnectedness.

Early contributions by Vidaurrázaga (2007) and Zalaquet (2007), drawing on testimonies of women engaged in militant politics, suggest that these subjectivities must be understood as political and social agents in their own right. Even when not articulated explicitly, their practices and lived experiences often contained elements of feminist critique. In the MIR, gender roles were generally reproduced unconsciously and without explicit reflection; nonetheless, certain extreme circumstances and forms of political engagement, encounters with state repression, detention and torture, exile, clandestine resistance, repatriation operations, forced many militants to confront, articulate, or question their assumptions about gender.

At the same time, understandings of gender roles also shifted in relation to the internal power dynamics of the Revolutionary Left Movement and to broader socio-cultural changes, particularly the emergence of public discourses that placed increasing emphasis on women's and feminist demands.

The experience of MIR militants inside the detention and torture centres created after the coup of 11 September 1973 gains particular relevance when examined through this analytical lens. Beyond the human rights violations they suffered, these experiences can also be approached as sites where political and identity-related tensions were renegotiated. Debates, contradictions, and both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic interpretations shaped the frameworks through which these memories

were constructed, setting the boundaries for how these events could later be recalled and analysed.

Within the MIR, political and identity struggles generated a model of expected behaviour under repression, an imperative presented as absolute and non-negotiable. At its core stood an idealised revolutionary figure: the MIR militant depicted as young, resilient, daring, intelligent, and critically aware (Morales Llaña, 2015). Much of this ideal derived from the figure of Miguel Enríquez[3], whose death at the hands of the DINA[4] came to be interpreted, in the organisation's narrative, as the ultimate expression of militant heroism (Rivas, 2007; Castillo, 2005; 2007). In a moment in which the organisation faced near-annihilation, the actions of its General Secretary reinforced not only this idealised code of conduct but also the identity bonds among militants, bonds that continued to influence the movement's political orientations. Yet this raises an important question. What occurred when such an ideal model proved impossible to embody within the reality of detention and torture? And how were alternative behaviours judged or criticised by militants, whether imprisoned or still operating in clandestinity, who held differing expectations of what resistance should look like?

Many of the organisation's gendered assumptions were, at the time, reproduced almost unconsciously, later confrontations with the rigid gender stereotypes embedded both in the dictatorship's military culture and in revolutionary movements opened the space for a situated critique. From the perspective of being a woman in the MIR, these militants gradually articulated a feminist awareness grounded in lived experience.

My aim is therefore to reinterpret spaces of imprisonment as arenas where political meanings, identities, and gender consciousness were re-

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3. Miguel Humberto Enríquez Espinosa (27 March 1944 - 5 October 1974) was a doctor and one of the founders of the Chilean Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR). He was Secretary General of the MIR between 1967 and his death in 1974.

After the *coup d'état* of 11 September 1973, Enríquez led the MIR's political-military resistance against the newly established dictatorship. After hiding for a year, DINA discovered his hideout in the working-class neighbourhood of San Miguel in Santiago. On 5 October 1974, his house was surrounded by DINA agents, supported by heavily armed security forces personnel in a troop transport vehicle and a helicopter. He was wounded at the beginning of the assault, while covering the retreat of his pregnant wife (Carmen Castillo, also wounded) and two other fleeing men. He received ten gunshot wounds, including one to the head.

4. [2] The Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional or DINA was the Chilean secret police during the early period of the military dictatorship.

configured. To do so, I opted to concentrate on the case of María Isabel, a MIR militant since 1967, detained in Villa Grimaldi, Tres Álamos, and Cuatro Álamos between 1975 and 1976. Her reflections on her militancy as a woman, on her condition as a political prisoner subjected simultaneously to political and gender oppression, and on the early feminist critique she developed offer a compelling entry point for this analysis.

To access this experience, I decided to work with a part of the biographical testimony collected in 2015 and put in writing in the article *La libertad en cautiverio: disputas políticas y reflexiones feministas en la experiencia de detención de una militante del MIR* (2015) by Marcela Morales Llaña.

Testimonies of captivity, torture and resistance from the perspective of a MIR militant

> Yo soy María Isabel, tengo 73 años, nací (…) un año después del terremoto de 1939, lo que fue muy importante en mi vida porque nací un año después que había muerto la hija mayor de mi abuela materna, y que era como muy importante en la vida familiar. Entonces como que de manera, yo diría, inconsciente, como control líquido, de pequeñita yo tenía que ser doctora y yo tenía que parecerme a lo que había sido la tía que era como una persona de construcción de acuerdos, de afecto familiar (María Isabel in Morales Llaña, 2015, p. 89).

Drawing on the testimony collected by Marcela Morales Llaña on Maria Isabel's[5] experience of life and militancy can be relevant for a historical reconstruction in which the leading voices of that period are placed at the centre. In this case, the choice is to begin the account of Maria Isabel's experience from her childhood memories and her bond with her maternal grandmother to understand how female figures began to influence Maria Isabel's life from a very young age. In this passage, María Isabel reflects on her early life and the personal and family circumstances that shaped her sense of identity and future aspirations. She begins by introducing herself and situating her birth in a specific historical context, she was

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5. Maria Isabel was a militant in the MIR.

born one year after the 1939 earthquake. This detail is not merely chronological; she emphasizes its significance for her personal and family life, explaining that she was born a year after the death of her maternal grandmother's eldest daughter, a figure who had held great importance within the family. María Isabel reflects that, in ways she could hardly articulate at the time, the loss within her family subtly shaped her early sense of responsibility and the expectations placed upon her. From a very young age, she felt compelled to pursue a medical career, aspiring to embody the qualities of her late aunt. In this way, she highlights how family history and childhood experiences influenced her self-understanding, her ambitions and her perceived role within the family. This example illustrates how personal biography, familial dynamics and early life experiences intertwine in the construction of identity, revealing the delicate balance between unconscious pressures and conscious goals in María Isabel's life.

María Isabel had moved to Santiago de Chile during the 1960s, where she began actively engaging in the social transformation movements of the decade.

> (…) leíamos mucho en esa época, leíamos Fanon, a la Simone de Beauvoir, pero sin plantearnos todavía en términos feministas, una suerte de militancia feminista. Era más la cultura feminista lo que nosotros creíamos, pero al mismo tiempo con esa mescolanza que teníamos en los sesenta, de la izquierda y el feminismo, que no era que el feminismo, sino que era que el socialismo, iba a resolver todos esos problemas, y por lo tanto nosotros luchábamos por el socialismo porque ahí todos íbamos a ser iguales, bueno todo el discurso más de la izquierda en que acomodábamos nuestras lecturas a esa propuesta de nueva sociedad. Y ahí vinieron todos los hechos, la revolución cubana, China, ahí teníamos amigos también que se fueron a China, que volvieron de China, que fueron a Cuba, que volvieron de Cuba, entonces, todo eso, fue amalgamándose digamos, en una visión ya de necesidad de militancia (*Ibidem*).

During 1960s, María Isabel describes how she and her comrades read authors like Fanon and de Beauvoir but did not yet frame their activism explicitly as feminist. Their engagement combined a feminist cultural awareness with leftist socialist ideals, believing that socialism would resolve social inequalities. They adapted their readings to fit a vision of a

just, new society. International events, such as the Cuban and Chinese revolutions, and friends' experiences in those countries, further shaped their outlook. Over time, these influences merged, fostering a sense of political militancy and the perceived necessity for activism.

The "we" that María Isabel evokes belongs to the 1960s, a collective "we" shaped by discussion, reading, learning and the exchange of ideas and responsibilities. Within this milieu, political militancy often emerged as a necessary avenue for pursuing social transformation. In her narrative, the events of 11 September 1973 appear almost foreseeable, as if they were part of the long, intricate trajectory toward the construction of socialism. The coup d'état marked a decisive biographical turning point. María Isabel was forced into clandestinity, navigating the dual challenge of continuing to resist and organise against the dictatorship while safeguarding her own life. The MIR, at that stage, chose not to seek political asylum abroad; instead, resistance to the regime became the organisation's defining political strategy.

In the immediate aftermath of the military takeover, the dictatorship's security apparatus focused their repression on groups capable of mounting organised opposition, with the MIR being a primary target. The regime implemented a policy of systematic extermination against militants and supporters alike.

In the early months of 1975, María Isabel was arrested in a neighborhood in eastern Santiago, where she had been living in hiding with other militants. Although she attempted to flee and resist capture, DINA agents discovered the house and apprehended her.

> Ahí me lleva, ya no me acuerdo así… parece que me llevaba del brazo, empujándome y apuntándome con su pistola y me devuelve hacia la casa y ahí entonces me coloca, había como tres autos y en uno de los autos estaba el compañero que vivía conmigo en la misma casa y él estaba herido, sangrando en el auto. Entonces me meten al auto y veo que está la ventana abierta y empecé a gritar, estaba lleno de gente, en las esquinas…mucha, mucha gente. Entonces yo empecé a gritar y grité nuestros nombres y dije 'hay un herido aquí, nos van a matar, nos van a Desaparecer (*Ibidem*).

In this passage, María Isabel recalls being forced toward a house at gunpoint. She describes seeing three cars, one of which contained a

companion from her household, who was injured and bleeding. She was pushed into the car and noticed the window was open, allowing her to see the crowded streets outside. She began shouting, calling out their names and alerting others that someone was wounded, while feeling afraid of being killed or disappeared.

Upon arrival at the Villa Grimaldi detention centre, prisoners were immediately subjected to a systematic regimen designed to break their spirits, combining physical abuse, psychological pressure and various forms of subjugation. Faced with physical torture, María Isabel consciously maintained a composed and deliberate stance, a resilience likely reinforced by her medical training. In those moments, the act of resistance took on a critical meaning: refusing to divulge information to DINA agents, protecting the integrity and morale of fellow militants and preserving one's political commitment. Within this harrowing environment, María Isabel recalls experiencing a remarkable sense of detachment from the fear of death, a psychological shield that allowed her to endure and persist.

> Pero el miedo a morir, yo creo que por la épica que teníamos en ese entonces, que teníamos que ser guerrilleras heroicas hasta la muerte, entonces el miedo a morir en mi caso y en el de muchas compañeras y compañeros no era lo que prevalecía en ese momento (…) lo más terrible era el dolor de ese minuto (Ivi, p. 93).

In this passage, the militant explains that the fear of dying was not the dominant feeling for her or many of her comrades. Instead, what was most overwhelming in the moment was the intense, immediate pain they experienced.

Even while still blindfolded, women detained in the military dictatorship's torture centres found ways to communicate with one another. In the midst of these extreme conditions, small spaces of connection, mutual support and subtle resistance began to emerge. Among María Isabel's recollections is the memory of a room with bunk beds, where, after enduring intense physical and psychological torture, a group of fellow detainees received her with warmth, care and «te acogían para que sintieras de algún modo que estabas en otro espacio que el que te habían-

tocado minutos antes» (*Ibidem*). She describes this space of solidarity and affection as one shared exclusively among women.

This separation by gender was also a deliberate tactic imposed by DINA agents, who prevented women from seeing their male comrades and vice versa. The detainees were forced to confront the reality that the military sought not only to dominate them, but also to supplant the revolutionary movement's men with a constructed form of masculinity designed to assert absolute control.

> Incluso en Villa Grimaldi llegó un día un señor y me sacaron a conversar con él en un patiecito. Él me dijo, te vengo a ofrecer que trabajes con nosotros, porque con nosotros vas a tenerlo todo, nosotros ahora tenemos un poder ilimitado, no te imaginas todo lo que vas a poder tener, si trabajas con nosotros.
>
> Bueno ahí, yo obviamente ahí... era un señor que estaba vestido de otra manera, que se notaba que tenía un don de mando porque estaba él y Moren Brito (…) Moren Brito me llevó donde él y Moren Brito se le cuadraba, o sea era como el jefe de Moren Brito. Y ahí yo le dije, no, yo me voy a dedicar ahora, si es que salgo viva de aquí me voy a dedicar a mi profesión, le dije cualquier lesera, me hice como la tecnócrata…(Ivi, p. 94).

María Isabel recalls being approached by a man at Villa Grimaldi who offered her wealth and power if she worked with them. She describes him as authoritative, noting that even Moren Brito, a figure of influence, showed deference to him. Despite the tempting offer, María Isabel refused, telling him that if she survived, she would focus on her professional career. The passage highlights both the pressure and the moral choices faced by detainees.

This strategy, rooted in the gendered logic of both military and patriarchal systems, highlights another dimension of the repression, as women were treated as objects, as spoils of war. Against this backdrop, the communication networks that imprisoned women developed to relay information to men in other sections can be seen as a further form of resistance. From the women's bathroom, they would discreetly transmit messages through a small window opening onto a tiny courtyard where male detainees were held.

Within the detention and torture centres, María Isabel and her fellow prisoners were confronted with a system that oppressed them not only as revolutionary militants but also as women, embodying the full weight of military and patriarchal ideology. By participating in political life, women and other subjectivities challenged a gender order that the regime sought to uphold and violently restore.

> Yo creo que a las mujeres había formas específicas de torturar y maltratar, como era… desde el inicio establecer que tú no habías cumplido con el rol de mujer y que, por lo tanto eras una puta (…) repetir que eras una puta en cada tortura (…), que habías llegado a esto por un tipo que te había seducido y que tú, tonta y puta estabas en esta situación. El maltrato por ser una mujer que se había metido en algo que no le correspondía, porque la política era asunto de hombres y tú tenías que estar en la casa, como buena esposa y madre teniendo hijos, esa era una gran diferencia y que nosotras lo computamos desde el primer momento (…) de obligarte, de mandatarte a asumir el rol femenino clásico (Ivi, p. 95).

The passage illustrates how women were subjected to specific forms of torture and mistreatment. From the very beginning, interrogators emphasized that women had failed to fulfill their "womanly" role, repeatedly insulting them and blaming them for their situation. She describes how they were condemned for engaging in politics, seen as a male domain, instead of fulfilling traditional roles as wives and mothers. The violence inflicted upon women in the detention centres was a direct punishment for transgressing the rigid gender norms imposed by the regime. It underscores how expectations tied to gender shaped both the methods and intensity of the abuse they suffered. Torturers, acting as agents of the state, operated under the assumption that women lacked autonomy in political life and occupied subordinate positions within their organizations. In turn, some detainees strategically leveraged this belief to their advantage, presenting themselves as uninformed or politically powerless in order to protect themselves from further harm.

> Había compañeras que estaban muy, muy mal. Compañeras que estaban resistiendo de una manera increíble, que sus compañeros todavía no habían caído y que las interrogaban para que cayera su compañero y ellas resistían y resistían (*Ibidem*).

María Isabel recounts how her fellow women militants endured extreme suffering while demonstrating remarkable resistance. Even in cases where their male comrades had not been arrested, they were subjected to intense interrogations designed to break their spirit, yet they persisted in resisting with determination. These experiences prompted María Isabel to reflect on what can now be understood as the intersections between gender, hierarchical structures, and power relations, highlighting how identity and authority were contested within the oppressive context of detention.

> Ese poder de resistencia de las mujeres que después modificaron su comportamiento, que para mí fue como el primer chispazo, desde mi reflexión rebelde feminista, de ese momento, de que qué pasaba ahí con esta cosa del amor y de las relaciones de poder, que yo en ese momento todavía no les decía relaciones de poder en la pareja, pero te digo, esto de ser una mujer estupenda y después quedar así quebrada totalmente (…) Esa diferencia que eran las relaciones de poder que podían ejercer tus parejas en un momento y que expresaban indudablemente el patriarcado al interior de la organización política (Ivi, p. 96).

The narrator of the testimony reflects on the women's remarkable resistance, which later changed their behavior. She sees this as an early spark for her feminist critique, noticing how power dynamics in relationships could leave women broken, recognizing these dynamics as expressions of patriarchy within political organization. This reflection reveals that the so-called "appropriate behaviour" expected of female MIR militants was often upheld by women only insofar as their male partners were able to meet the same standard. During torture, DINA agents humiliated the women not solely because of their gender, but also because they were militants perceived as subordinate to men. María Isabel gradually recognized that the political leadership of the MIR was overwhelmingly male and that this hierarchical structure had never been seriously questioned within the organisation.

Paradoxically, however, the very process of resistance and the consolidation of militant identity also gave rise to an early, subtle critical awareness among the women of the MIR. This awareness began to challenge the monolithic, patriarchal character of the organisation itself. In the extreme conditions of detention and torture, the militants developed

a line of reflection that would become a resource for their subsequent development of feminist theories, practices of care, and solidarity. After spending two weeks at Villa Grimaldi, María Isabel and fifteen other detainees were transferred to Cuatro Álamos.

> (Cuatro Álamos) que era el lugar que nos llevaban por un tiempo, para que de alguna manera desaparecieran las señales y pudieras ser presentada después en Tres Álamos, que era el campo de concentración… donde ya se te reconocía a ti como prisionera política, porque antes tú estabas desaparecida, igual que todos los que desaparecieron (Ivi, p. 98).

Cuatro Álamos functioned as a temporary holding site, designed to erase any trace of detainees before their transfer to Tres Álamos, the concentration camp where they were officially registered as political prisoners. Until that point, they were treated as disappeared, like all those abducted by the regime. Upon arrival, María Isabel and the other women were placed in a cell with six or seven fellow detainees, featuring a single window that looked out onto a small courtyard.

> (…) por esas ventanas de las piezas, ya establecimos todo un sistema de comunicación con los compañeros, a través incluso de los reflejos de los vidrios, porque algunas ventanas se abrían y en esas ventanas escribíamos con las manos y el reflejo en la ventana lo veían ellos del otro lado, era una cosa increíble. Así hacíamos las listas de los que estaban pasando, de las personas que no llegaban todavía… (*Ibidem*).

The passage highlights how the women devised a system of communication with fellow detainees through the windows. Using reflections on the glass, they were able to exchange information, keep track of who had arrived and who was still missing and coordinate their efforts with remarkable resourcefulness despite the constraints of captivity. Eventually, many of the detainees were moved to Tres Álamos, where they began to establish a strong sense of collective organization. There, they engaged in economic activities such as crafting and found ways to reorganize their political militancy. María Isabel recalls the transfer to Tres Álamos and the reconstruction of the collective almost as a moment of celebration. This transition signified a return to life, sustained and strengthened by the solidarity and support of the women's community.

Esa noche como a las 4 de mañana, se abren las puertas y entramos a Tres Álamos, y era una cosa que nadie entendía nada, porque… entramos las mujeres a un lado y los hombres a otro; a los hombres los llevaron a un pabellón de hombres y nosotras a unas barracas que estaban al final de Tres Álamos. Donde se abrió una puerta de madera y yo veía, cómo decenas de mujeres se nos tiraban encima desde las camas y nos abrazaban y nos llevaban a un patio y nos daban de comer… a las cuatro de la mañana y todas despiertas y tirando las almohadas y aquí están a salvo. Eran casi 200 mujeres que en ese momento estaban ahí… y dicen, que aquí hay que respetar, que las que llegan tienen que estar durmiendo en el suelo y las otras a medida que las otras se van yendo ya después pueden después tocar cama, pero por ahora colchonetas en el suelo. Pero nosotras felices con una colchoneta en el suelo, ya con tanta gente, nosotros estábamos como que no entendíamos nada, todavía no (Ivi, p. 99).

María Isabel remembers arriving at Tres Álamos during the night, disoriented by the unfamiliar surroundings. Men and women were separated, and she recalls being warmly received by dozens of women who embraced them, led them to a yard and offered them food. Nearly 200 women were held there, and despite having to sleep on mats on the floor, they felt a sense of relief and happiness at being safe among so many comrades. Rebuilding the collective also involved practical organization, including generating income through work. Using support from the Red Cross, they were able to produce and sell handcrafted items both within Chile and abroad, relying on the solidarity networks that assisted Chilean political prisoners, «iniciando lo que le llamamos el taller laboral, fabricaban vestidos mexicanos, blusas; taller de diseño, de costura, de bordados…miles de talleres» (*Ibidem*). The proceeds were shared equally among all detainees, without distinction of political affiliation. At the same time, a more structured form of militant life developed within these spaces. As María Isabel recalls, «como el comandante Pacheco decía, las que fosforean; y fosforear era tener reuniones políticas. Nosotras, mientras bordábamos, ahí sí que nos juntábamos las de un partido, las de otro y ahí hacíamos nuestros análisis» (Ivi, p. 100). Political militancy was thus rearticulated alongside the daily routines of detention. It was within these spaces that early feminist reflections began to take shape and intertwine with their collective experience.

Ahí incluso empezamos a hacer el análisis feminista de lo que nos estaba sucediendo. Muchas de nosotras decíamos, antes creíamos que éramos feministas, y ahí creo que empezamos a tener otro tipo de conciencia feminista, que ya podíamos hacer este análisis… de que parece que el socialismo no iba a poder solucionar los problemas de todo el mundo, incluidas las mujeres; y que, al interior de la organización existía machismo, y empezamos ahí entonces a analizar (*Ibidem*).

María Isabel recounts how they began to develop a feminist perspective on their own experiences. They came to recognize that, unlike before, they could critically assess the limitations of socialism, understanding that it alone could not address all issues, particularly those affecting women, and that sexism was present even within their own organization. This realization marked the emergence of a deeper feminist consciousness. Their reflections extended beyond personal insight, prompting them to question their own militancy within the MIR. A small group of seven or eight women, including María Isabel, initiated discussions that challenged the gendered division of tasks within the movement. Through this process, they implicitly asserted that such divisions were not natural or inevitable but socially constructed, and therefore open to change.

(…) Las mujeres escribían a máquina, llevaban mensajitos. Había solo una del Comité Central, dos dirigentes regionales y una o dos jefas de grupos políticos militares, y el resto toda era mensajera o escritora a máquina… entonces todo eso y nuestro análisis acerca de todo eso (*Ibidem*).

The testimony illustrates how women in the movement often occupied roles such as typists or couriers, with only a few assuming leadership positions. Even within these seemingly subordinate tasks, they engaged in critical reflection and analysis about their circumstances and the organization itself. This work took place in secrecy, under the constant threat of imprisonment and military surveillance, demanding careful coordination and the cultivation of specialized skills. As María Isabel recalls, «(…) eso lo escribimos en unas batistas, que hacíamos unos bastidores de madera, los clavábamos y escribíamos en las noches ahí, poníamos una frazada negra y ahí adentro una lamparita y escribíamos» (*Ibidem*).

Despite these restrictive conditions, the women succeeded not only in collectively drafting a political document but also in sending it abroad to a group in France that supported Chilean resistance. In Morales Llaña's account, María Isabel emphasizes that this small group sustained and strengthened itself not merely as MIR militants but also through the cultivation of an emerging feminist consciousness.

Conclusions

Analysing and interpreting María Isabel's testimony from a critical perspective has not been an easy task, as it required interpreting the memory of a militant through the study of writings in which her story already emerged. However, the collected works of other Latin American scholars have been fundamental in both bringing these testimonies to light and developing this contribution. It is also important to emphasize that in interpreting a single story, there is no intention to suggest that the path followed by María Isabel and her comrades (expressed through the use of "we") was the only possible route toward the emergence of a critical feminist reflection within the MIR. Clearly, this contribution must also be understood within the limits of partiality.

Some memories tend to be marginalised or entirely omitted from the dominant narratives of the recent past, particularly those concerning experiences of political repression, detention, and everyday resistance. These omissions often stem from a combination of social, political and institutional factors shaped by colonial and patriarchal structures, including the selective recording of history and the privileging of certain voices over others. Bringing these forms of resistance to the forefront is essential, as detention centres were, and continue to be, not only sites of control and punishment but also spaces where acts of everyday solidarity and resistance emerged and continue to emerge. These acts, precisely because of their often-imperceptible nature, are far more challenging to recognise, interpret, and historicise within traditional historical narratives.

The circulation of testimonies and interpretations, such as those associated with María Isabel's experience, encourages us to critically examine which histories have been silenced, marginalised, or neglected, and to uncover a broader spectrum of experiences related to detention and po-

litical resistance. By documenting and analysing these personal accounts, we gain insight into the nuanced ways in which individuals navigated oppressive environments, asserting their existence even under the most restrictive circumstances. Such narratives provide not only a window into the everyday mechanisms of domination, surveillance and control, but also illuminate the diverse strategies of resistance that arise in response, ranging from individual acts of defiance to more organised forms of collective protest.

Moreover, engaging with these memories challenges dominant historiographical frameworks, invites a more pluralistic understanding of the past and highlights the importance of recognising these types of experiences, revealing how resistance can manifest in multiple forms. Ultimately, incorporating these stories into academic discourse not only enriches our historical understanding but also challenges existing power hierarchies by adopting a feminist perspective, even within the academy.

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Shifting geometries of the urban border: the informal settlement of Santa Maria Maggiore in the Vicofaro district (Pistoia)

Chiara Francavilla[1]

Informality and the production of a silenced margin

Over the years, the governance of migration has fostered an increasing diversification of migratory trajectories. These trajectories diverge in the departure contexts and pre-migratory rationales (de Haas, 2008; Gallo, 2011), but also in the conditions of arrival and in the differentiated processes of settlement that shape how individuals inhabit both *transit* and *destination* spaces (Ambrosini, 2008). This heterogeneity becomes particularly salient in the domain of dwelling. Alongside rural contexts, informal settlements have emerged in urban and peri-urban areas, spaces where migrant agency contends with highly specific configurations of constraint and possibility. In many cases, such formations arise out of structural barriers to accessing formal housing markets: exorbitant rents, landlords' refusal to lease to individuals with migratory backgrounds, alongside discriminatory practices ranging from the imposition of disproportionate guarantees to overt xenophobia and racism (Gargiulo, 2014b).

Informal settlements confront us with a spectrum of configurations, yet they often share foundational logics of exclusion. These include exception-making mechanisms that systematically prevent access to housing that is safe, habitable, sanitary, and dignified. Such exclusions frequently intersect with broader conditions of vulnerability found in the lived experiences of people on the move. In the field of reception, notions

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of inclusion and protection are persistently undermined by entrenched social, political, and economic exclusion, enabled and reinforced by pervasive and dehumanising institutional practices (Pinelli, 2013).

Although no single definition of informal settlement is universally accepted, a composite profile has emerged in the literature (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2018; Staid, 2017; Dadusc, Grazioli and Martinez, 2019; Sanò, Storato and Della Puppa, 2021). These settlements often occupy abandoned public or private spaces, repurposed for habitation by communities who carve their space in marginal locations, both spatially and institutionally disconnected from urban infrastructure and public services. While often deemed illegal by the law, these settlements are not necessarily driven by a politics of overt resistance. Rather, they frequently reflect sheer necessity, as in the case of so-called deprivation-based squats: survival strategies for those structurally excluded from any form of formal housing (Gargiulo, 2014a).

The case of Vicofaro[2] exemplifies such dynamics. It is a material symptom of institutional failure, and specifically the inability of local authorities to provide viable alternatives. And yet, it also bears traces of resistance, exposing the limits of a system unable or unwilling to accommodate life at the margins, and to especially learn from it. This study aligns with a body of scholarship that foregrounds the agency of migrant people as political and social actors: agents who devise strategies to resist exclusion and assert their presence within host societies. At the same time, it assumes a position informed by postcolonial critique: subalternity, and the study of marginality itself, is shaped by structures of power that hold privileged access to dominant discourses on "minorities" (Spivak, 1988; Graeber, 2013). Just as the migrant subject is compressed within the socio-spatial reality of the settlement under examination, so too does this text seek to convey the weight of such forces that border subaltern voices. These constraints operate within frameworks that are

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2. Vicofaro is the name of a neighborhood in the city of Pistoia, located on the outskirts of the historic center. The area is home to the parish of Santa Maria Maggiore in Vicofaro, whose origins predate 1783 (it is estimated that the foundations date back to the mid-16th century), the year in which the main building was officially established as a parish dedicated to the worship of Santa Maria Maggiore. "Vicofaro" is also the term commonly used in the city to refer to the informal settlement located there – a usage that will be adopted throughout this study as well.

simultaneously shifting and rigid, hindering the articulation of collective claims by populations that remain persistently rendered invisible.

As with the media narratives that have long circulated around Vicofaro, the central figure here is not the individual migrant, but the settlement itself, it being a porous and contested space, a shifting constellation of residents and boundaries. It offers a critical vantage point on what marginality can become: not merely a site of exclusion, but one of situated knowledge, political observation, and contested inhabitation.

Temporal and spatial parenthesis in a manufactured precarity

In cases where informal settlements emerge in the wake of structural shortcomings or failures in the reception of migrant subjects, they often conform to the unwritten rules of social marginality. These spaces contribute to a broader landscape in which not only is dignified housing absent, but individuals are also penalised across multiple dimensions: employment, education, healthcare, social relations, and, more broadly, inclusion. In this sense, such experiences are fully embedded within the poietic processes of systemic exclusion.

Given the multiple layers of deprivation that shape the residency of precarious and mobile populations, their practices of inhabiting space often unfold along a continuum of possibilities, from frontier settlements to seasonal or short-term arrangements toward relatively more stable configurations. While the first category is more closely defined by spatiality, with settlements located on the margins and its inhabitants incrementally exposed to deep forms of vulnerability, regardless of the duration of their stay, the others are more clearly articulated through temporality. In recent years, temporality has gained prominence within critical migration literature (Dalakoglou and Harvey, 2012; Griffiths, Rogers and Anderson, 2013; Haas, 2018; Jacobsen and Karlsen, 2020). The theoretical apparatus underpinning human mobility studies has increasingly foregrounded the layered nature of time in shaping divergent migration trajectories, as well as the differentiated stages within individual journeys (Kobelinsky, 2010; 2014).

In the case of informal settlements, time appears to govern the everyday experience of residence with the unpredictability of an external varia-

ble. The pace and duration of inhabitation seem to hover above the heads of those who dwell indefinitely. Yet this indeterminacy is not absolute. The power to shape temporal architectures, what Jacobsen and Karlsen (2020) describe as "temporal regimes", is often exercised by actors who determine both the lifespan of these dwellings and the conditions under which they may exist. These architectures, therefore, are as much imposed as they are enacted, and they become particularly meaningful when analysing the relations between migration, reception, and precariousness.

This relational field makes it possible to locate responsibility for temporality – whether cyclical, suspended, or fractured – on either side of the informal settlement dynamic. In some cases, migrant people may adopt short-term housing solutions cyclically, as adaptive responses to personal and market contingencies. More often, however, time is imposed from above, through externally dictated calendars of deadlines, extensions, and waiting. Many informal settlements are configured as inherently short-term, shaped by political will: they exist only under the horizon of their imminent dismantling. Forced evictions and a dominant public discourse that frames dwellers as occupying a temporary bracket contribute to sustaining a state of precarity which, paradoxically, also feeds the hope of "liberation"[3] among local residents.

In order to understand the key actors that shape the poietic geometries of space and temporality, it is necessary to clarify the territorial, managerial, and operational context in which the informal settlement of Santa Maria Maggiore in Vicofaro emerged. Starting with a framework agreement signed in 2016 and implemented in practice from 2017, the Prefecture of Pistoia began to allocate funding, both from state resources and from European programmes and national calls, most notably the FAMI programme, to manage the local reception system. These funds were granted to a small group of managing entities selected based on prior organisational capacity and rooted territorial presence. These included five social cooperatives, two diocesan Caritas centres (at the time, those of Pescia and Pistoia, later merged in 2024), and one non-profit social

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3. The term *"liberation"* is used in the transcript of a debate among Turin's city councillors (see the remarks by councillor for social policies Schellino, in https://www.cittagora.it/altre-notizie/palazzine-ex-moi-dibattito-in-aula.html/), in reference to the eviction of the former MOI complex.

promotion association, for a total of eight participating organisations[4]. It is worth noting that, in the years following the initial funding allocation, this composition remained largely unchanged. In the absence of any new selection procedures, a regime of operational continuity was established, with activities extended on a provisional basis until the end of 2021[5].

Between religious solidarity and State-controlled hospitality

The Vicofaro initiative began in 2016, with the establishment of a partnership between the parish of Santa Maria Maggiore and the civil association *Virgilio – Città Futura*. This collaboration was created specifically to enable the parish to participate in the national reception call issued by the Ministry of the Interior, via a legally recognised entity connected to two diocesan priests: Don Alessandro Carmignani and Don Massimo Biancalani. This first CAS (Extraordinary Reception Centre) project welcomed 18 asylum seekers, distributed between the municipalities of Pistoia and Marliana. The decision to introduce a parish institution into the public procurement mechanisms of the reception system represented a significant novelty. It necessitated, for instance, affiliation with a formally recognised civil society body, which – by virtue of its legal status – could access projects managed through the Questura (police prefecture) without triggering conflict over its broader social aims, such as solidarity in action, participation, or active citizenship.

It is also essential to situate the Vicofaro experiment within the broader institutional logic of the Church, here indicated as one pole of the polyarchic structure it shares with the state. The ecclesiastical framework contains multiple and often contradictory expectations, which arguably opened the breach that Don Biancalani sought to traverse with his own vision of reception. His stance echoed the words and actions of Pope Francis, particularly when the pontiff denounced the "globalisation of

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4. Retrieved from Prefettura di Pistoia, Ufficio territoriale del Governo – Convenzione per la messa a disposizione di posti straordinari per la prima accoglienza dei cittadini stranieri temporaneamente presenti sul territorio.

5. The document-based research and participant observation were carried out between July 2023 and December 2023. The data presented in this study reflect the most recent findings available at the time of the research.

indifference" during his visit to Lampedusa, his first trip as Pope[6], and called upon dioceses and parishes to offer concrete hospitality to migrants abandoned by state institutions. This exhortation stood in marked contrast to the more cautious position of the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI), which, in its *Administrative Instruction* (2005), declared:

> It is advisable that diocesan entities do not directly manage charitable activities (e.g., soup kitchens, elderly or disability centres, shelters, holiday homes) […] where these involve specific responsibilities. These activities should preferably be handled by other specialised bodies (diocesan foundations, religious orders, associations, cooperatives, etc.) with which the diocese may enter into contractual agreements[7].

The diocesan Church, then, delegates acts of charity and solidarity to external or semi-autonomous entities, distinct from canonical bodies such as parishes and churches, which are guided by a kind of de facto *non expedit*, or "not advisable", as if under an implicit prohibition. Consequently, socially and pastorally-oriented organisations like diocesan and parish Caritas centres are activated as intermediaries. These bodies, while still within the diocesan structure, operate with a degree of organisational autonomy, and play a crucial role not only in the provision of charity but in sustaining dialogue with the surrounding socio-political landscape.

Yet public controversy did not initially stem from doubts about the legitimacy of this unusual participation of the parish in local reception governance. Rather, early backlash emerged from Don Biancalani's decision to dedicate a space within the parish for Muslim prayer. The public response to this choice revealed deeper fractures, particularly within the local Catholic community, which increasingly opposed Vicofaro's trajectory of inclusion. The diocesan bishop, for instance, issued a statement via instant messaging to the faithful, declaring: *"It is not possible to create spaces for the prayer of other faiths and religions within churches dedicated to Christian liturgy and community gatherings",* adding, *"the reasons are so numerous and self-evident that I don't believe they even require explanation".*

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6.   More information available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-23224010

7.   Retrieved from page 68 of CEI's Administrative Instructions (2005), available at: In: https://gslex.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/CEI-Istruzione-in-materia-amministrativa-

2005.pdf. No subsequent publications by the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) have been issued that would significantly modify the content referenced.

These fractures widened rapidly, accelerated by Biancalani's open divergence from the protocols agreed with the Prefecture. He openly privileged the universalist ethics of the Gospel over the rigidities of Italian bureaucracy. As the facility's official representative, Biancalani was expected, from the outset, to report guest presences and personal details in accordance with operational procedures laid out as early as 2011 (Regional Decree 3343/2011). These procedures aimed to track all individuals included in the CAS system, subjecting them to conditions analogous to the screening mechanisms employed at national borders and hotspots, therefore requiring legal custodians of reception arrangements to engage in techniques of selection that have become standard in governing migratory subjects (Gargiulo, 2014). One such condition required a regular legal status, which at the time appeared consistent with ordinary reception norms.

In July 2017, the visit of two police officers to the parish made evident that a so-called "clandestine migrant" had been admitted: the episode marked the beginning of a cycle of sanctions against the project's leadership. It became increasingly clear that Vicofaro would distinguish itself sharply from other reception sites. As Biancalani recounts, his decision to forego intake registration and identification protocols soon made the facility a reference point not only for those independently seeking refuge, but also for external organisations, often located outside Tuscany, who began referring "irregular" beneficiaries to Vicofaro through informal channels. These were individuals who had fallen out of regular reception systems, often during the course of otherwise standard trajectories.

In Biancalani's own words:

> A few months later, two teenagers were referred to me from Rome. They'd been thrown out by the Prefecture because they hadn't provided their date of birth, and they'd just turned 18. A friend from a cooperative called and asked, "Will you take them in?" That's when we began working on two tracks, the official one and the unofficial one. Over time, the unofficial one became the priority.

The refusal to engage in mapping, screening, and bureaucratic management – as commonly practiced by institutional actors – soon became the defining orientation of Vicofaro's ideological and operational model.

It was in these formative years that Biancalani declared the CAS system incompatible with Gospel principles of hospitality and shifted his efforts toward the most marginalised migrant groups, those he openly described as *the system's waste*. While residents' individual circumstances varied widely, their experiences could nonetheless be roughly grouped into a taxonomy of exclusion:

a. persons excluded from formal reception circuits due to legal or administrative charges;

b. individuals in possession of expulsion orders (*foglio di via*) but still find themselves within Italian territory;

c. subjects with refugee or protection status, yet lacking the means to sustain themselves and receiving no public assistance;

d. persons with disabilities who, falling into the above categories, were unable to access adequate welfare services.

To withdraw from the CAS network was to renounce official recognition within the local reception landscape. It meant accepting a new relational framework: becoming illegal in the eyes of the public administration and the Questura, non-compliant in the language of NGOs, blasphemous in the eyes of certain parishioners. Yet perhaps the most profound shift lay in the relational fabric between volunteers, staff, and residents (newcomers and long-term dwellers alike)who shared a condition of growing vulnerability and the search for collective survival strategies.

While Santa Maria Maggiore had, in 2016, achieved a degree of institutional legitimacy, particularly in terms of registration and legal domicile, this status was revoked once the parish exited the formal reception circuit. Both the registry office and the Questura suspended residence declarations and hospitality certifications, even when the dwelling was actual, continuous, and far from fictitious. As some volunteers recalled:

When the CAS was running, everyone had residence papers. We arrived during a full-blown emergency, right when the Questura began refusing to accept hospitality declarations for a number of young men. They weren't allowed to do that. They claimed that sanitary conditions were inadequate for more than twenty people.

And further:

> This is just their interpretation, really. That written document [referring to the declaration] is something you're required to file within 48 hours: it's a communication, not a request. There's no yes or no to be given.

The issue was eventually brought before an ASGI (Association for Juridical Studies on Immigration) lawyer, who challenged the legal basis of the automatic rejections and managed to bypass the administrative bottleneck. Yet the situation was never fully restored:

> For some permits, Vicofaro's hospitality is still not considered valid. The Questura conceded on some fronts and accepted certain declarations, but when it comes to permits tied to formal employment, for example, they still claim that Vicofaro doesn't meet the "hospitality" requirement. In other words, they'll accept it for the more "fragile" permits, like protection, but not for anything that requires deeper territorial integration.

The institutional resistance to recognising residency at Vicofaro reflects the forms of arbitrary, discretionary governance that Gargiulo has identified, particularly when municipal staff act based on prior knowledge or informal reputations. In this case, rejections hinge on personal assessments by public officials, who act as gatekeepers of acceptable housing. These assessments cite issues such as overcrowding, despite wide fluctuations in occupancy, unsuitability of the premises (even when Don Biancalani had repeatedly addressed safety concerns flagged by the local health authority), and, ultimately, political illegitimacy. Migrant illegality is here intensified not only by the non-recognition of the dwelling, but also by its symbolic association with disobedience and deviance. The relationship between Vicofaro and the registry office since 2017 reveals the deeply performative and disciplinary potential embedded in the act of registering residence. Registration serves not only to record presence, but to adjudicate worthiness, and to ultimately filter who is deemed eligible for municipal inclusion (Gargiulo, 2021b).

Beyond this meritocratic logic, one can trace in the behaviour of Pistoia's administration a tendency toward spatial governance. This logic seeks to bind those who reside – either by necessity or by choice – within

Vicofaro's boundaries, enclosing them within both physical and administrative borders. Public perceptions of the settlement are projected onto its residents, who become the embodied representation of a contested urban frontier. As Khosravi (2019) argues, the border follows the migrant subject, shaping their identity, structuring their access to services, and inscribing their pathway with exclusion and control. What we encounter here is a persistent regime of exception in migration governance: one that deploys processes of ghettoisation to deny individuals the very services that should constitute their fundamental rights (Gargiulo and D'Angelo, 2021).

A shifting legal framework

Although the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Vicofaro displays a number of features characteristic of the formal reception system, many of its structural and operational traits allow us to conceptualise the experience within the broader field of informal settlements. The absence of political and media legitimation, combined with unstable administrative recognition, effectively renders it an urban void: simultaneously integrated into public discourse and marginalised in the operational routines of institutional reception. It is a space where individual irregularity intersects with allegations of squatting, criminality, and deviance within a context defined by the total absence of alternatives.

And yet, there are moments when securitarian logics seem to converge with those of care. One such instance occurred in July 2023, when Mayor Tomasi signed an eviction order addressed to Don Biancalani, in his capacity as legal representative of the parish. It is important to note that the political motivations behind this order appear to diverge significantly from the findings of a site inspection conducted by the local health authority (ASL) just two days prior. That report cited conditions of overcrowding, severe deficiencies in lighting and ventilation, and a general state of hygienic and sanitary neglect, including "waste, dirt, mould, infiltration, food residues, standing wastewater, rodent and bird droppings", the use of "outdoor areas as urinals", and the presence of "synanthropic animals potentially acting as disease vectors", posing "risks of zoonotic transmission".

None of these findings were new. Many of them could be attributed to administrative negligence, such as the discretionary suspension of waste collection by the municipal entity in charge, but the urgency of the eviction seemed to hinge on a specific news item: one of the residents had tested positive for tuberculosis. This single fact triggered a spike in political rhetoric and media alarmism. As reported by *Il Tirreno* (22 July 2023)[8]:

> This is a very different situation from previous ones. We're no longer talking merely about hygiene regulations, waste management, structural safety, or legal compliance. This time, the health of individuals is at concrete risk. At Vicofaro, the danger is that of a tuberculosis outbreak.

The eviction notice itself employed notably alarmist language, demanding that Don Biancalani vacate the parish premises within 15 days, a demand he immediately rejected through an open declaration of disobedience. As the deadline passed, the next phase, meaning a forced removal, was expected. However, the local police responded in a similar vein, stating they lacked the resources and capacity to evict more than 160 individuals, and referred the matter back to the Prefecture.

Vicofaro's isolation from the local solidarity network has made community ties among migrants essential for survival, while also highlighting a growing dependence on non-institutional responses. In this precarious context, the relationships with volunteers have become critical, often taking on hierarchical forms shaped by the gravity and invisibility of residents' administrative exclusion. In many cases, these conditions make it impossible for them to advocate for themselves.

Observing the dynamics between volunteers and residents on via Santa Maria Maggiore reveals how profoundly administrative irregularity can permeate every aspect of daily life. Despite clear distinctions in roles and expectations, and many different uses of the parish space, engagement in Vicofaro's unauthorised reception model has led all actors to navigate informal legal and bureaucratic arrangements, especially in the face of restrictive procedural barriers. It is here that informal settlements emerge not merely as sites of survival, but as sites of strategy and struggle, spaces

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8. More on the website: https://www.iltirreno.it/pistoia/cronaca/2023/07/22/news/sgombero-ordinato-per-rischio-di-un-epidemia-di-tubercolosi-1.100349422

where relationships become vehicles for asserting denied rights (Belloni, Fravega and Giudici, 2020).

One striking example is the legal advice service, run by six volunteers whose expertise derives from hands-on experience. Assistance is activated upon request by residents, who may attend the office on the ground floor of the rectory every Wednesday from 2:30 p.m. to receive support or initiate legal processes. This includes handling administrative procedures, liaising with pro bono immigration lawyers and ASGI personnel (though not in criminal matters), and communicating with municipal offices and the local health authority (Società della Salute).

As the volunteers report, the life stories of Vicofaro residents often expose the tensions and gaps in existing legislation, making partnerships with legal professionals vital:

> We need lawyers for appeals when residence permits expire. We follow cases through to the Court of Cassation. We also submit new applications for international protection once the initial route has expired (what's called "reiterated" or "special" protection), and you have to start over. We have young men who used to be regular and now are not, they've had jobs that ended, moved locations: different situations that left them stuck, with long-expired permits. So, they need a lawyer to pick things up again.

At times, Vicofaro's team becomes a resource for lawyers as well, especially in housing emergencies:

> It's happened that a lawyer calls us when a client has nowhere to sleep. Sometimes a young man reaches out to a lawyer and it turns out he's sleeping on the street. Some lawyers are really good, like this one, but once the positive ruling comes, they stop following the case. But then there's the entire phase involving the Questura, and that's when they send them to us.

Over six years, volunteers estimate they've documented more than 500 people, though this number does not reflect the full range of those who have stayed at Vicofaro. One of the most telling episodes occurred upon hearing of the eviction order. As recounted:

When we got the tip about the eviction, and I mean before it was official, we rushed here that very night and emptied the cabinet we always keep locked. It's where we keep the folders with the paper documents of everyone who's ever asked us for help.

Another volunteer adds:

It was not just the paper, we grabbed everything: past agendas, and especially the computer, which we normally leave here. We acted quickly and brought it all to our homes. Otherwise, they would have found the names of everyone. And it would have affected us too, because, you know, people tell us things in confidence, and we record both their personal histories and their current situations. But by law, we're not really supposed to do that.

The issue of documentation and privacy grows particularly complex when legal support is offered by unpaid civilians, volunteers who answer only to their own conscience and to Don Biancalani. One curious feature is the privacy notice distributed at the first meeting. This form lists the names of both volunteers and residents and is signed by the latter and the parish priest, ostensibly to formalise the interaction. But as multiple accounts make clear, this document holds no legal weight. Rather, it serves as an internal pact: an expression of mutual trust within the community.

There is also a pragmatic rationale behind the volunteers' strict attention to documentation, as explained:

Some residents don't stay here full-time, they work elsewhere and come and go, or move in and out of centres. They don't have fixed homes. And when they are here, they don't have wardrobes, nightstands, they have nothing. They keep everything in their pockets. So, it's common for them to lose documents. That's why we make copies of everything, store them digitally, and print them out if needed.

The extreme precarity of the housing, the high turnover, and the flexible use of reception services on via Santa Maria Maggiore have made meticulous documentation a pragmatic necessity. This enables volunteers to manage the informal administrative routines that have evolved to navigate persistent obstacles. Similarly, the volunteer who oversees the Ital-

ian language school, preparing residents for the exam at the local CPIA, keeps records of personal information: name, surname, country of origin, spoken languages, and Italian proficiency. These are collected on paper sheets for the purpose of tailoring lessons and tracking progress.

What we see is an attempt to systematise inherently fluid activities using bureaucratic instruments, even though nothing about these practices is standardised. Attendance at language lessons is irregular, individual trajectories vary widely, and legal and educational needs require highly customised pathways. While sensitive data collection may serve multiple functions depending on the context, it is safe to say that none of these tracking mechanisms are used in the surveillance-oriented sense prescribed by official protocols. Nor has there been any observed resistance to more flexible approaches. The desire to maintain a structured system has never, in practice, eclipsed the need for an adaptive attitude in the face of vastly divergent life stories.

The street-level management of irregularity

One of the most debated issues between Don Biancalani and municipal and provincial authorities concerns the formal pairing of mapping and monitoring, already partially identified as a crucial element in defining the irregular status of the Vicofaro settlement. The very nature of the Vicofaro project raises complex ethical and deontological concerns whenever any form of identification is applied. As has been repeatedly clarified in this work, the hosted community is heterogeneous and in constant flux, and while it would be incorrect to claim that all residents are undocumented and thus at risk of being reported, one cannot overlook the dangers posed by recognition and registration initiatives. The ongoing tension between care and concern quickly spills over into the domain of control (Perna, 2019).

A particularly revealing detail emerges from Don Biancalani's own account, when asked about his relationship with the police and with law enforcement agencies. The situation is described in the following exchange:

Q: Don't all these inspections make you uneasy?

A: It's true that the inspections are ongoing, but we're not really hated by the police… otherwise, certain people... sometimes it's the carabinieri themselves who ask me whether someone is staying here.

Q: Would you define this as a form of control?

A: We have many borderline cases. Keep in mind that there's a direct link between Vicofaro and Le Cascine in Florence[9]: during the day [the guys] go there, and at night they come back by train.

Q: What's your relationship with the police like today?

A: Police headquarters are complex institutions. It's one thing to talk about the DIGOS, another to deal with the regular officers who stop you on the street. They do the dirty work. For them, having these guys here is just a hassle. But I can talk to the chief of police, and also the commander of the carabinieri. For DIGOS, though, you need a different approach.

The dynamics described by Don Biancalani seem to echo Lipsky's theory of street-level bureaucracy (2010). As previously noted, the parish of Santa Maria Maggiore is under constant scrutiny from multiple actors who, with varying intensity, orbit around the community, including law enforcement agents. The Vicofaro coordinator himself acknowledges that his relationship with law enforcement is now part of the routine operations of the site. These routines evolve in parallel with the surprise inspections ordered by the police headquarters, typically carried out by the same public security force. On this point, Biancalani denounces the existence of a quasi-harassment system of constant reporting by neighbours.

Lipsky (2010) identifies police officers and similar figures as street-level bureaucrats by definition, highlighting traits that seem to align precisely with Vicofaro's everyday reality. These are institutional actors working

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9.   In recent years, the Cascine Park in Florence has increasingly attracted the attention of both the media and political actors. Long portrayed as a hotspot for crime, drug dealing, and assaults, it was also the setting for an "anti-degradation" demonstration organized by Forza Italia (see the news article: https://www.nove.firenze.it/firenze-manifestazione-forza-italia-alle-cascine.htm).

in operational roles on the front lines, maintaining direct and frequent contact with the public, and applying policies whose effects often ought to be interpreted and adapted on a case-by-case basis. The implementation of rules becomes dynamic, deviating from the fixity expected by normative systems. As a result, a kind of situational practice emerges, one in which the relationship between actors becomes decisive.

Some of the young men describe typical scenarios that connect them to the local legal apparatus and its "specialists" in familiar ways. M. explains:

> Here [at Vicofaro], they show up when there's trouble, since fights are common. In those cases, the municipal police come, check your documents, and then either say you're good, or tell you "jail", or that you have to leave Pistoia for a while, maybe go to Florence or somewhere else.

From his viewpoint, police visits to the parish are thus primarily framed as conflict resolution, triggered by tensions that attract attention from local residents, who file reports. According to Don Biancalani, the chain typically goes from residents to the Lega party, and then to the municipal police, in a political telephone game. In response to these reports, efforts to mediate quickly turn into standard stop-and-identify procedures. In those moments, officers effectively become decision-makers or, as Lipsky (2010) would put it, de facto policy-makers for the administrative apparatus of law enforcement. Discretion and case-by-case management become cornerstones of their operational logic (Mezzadra, 2004).

Building on these insights, we may refer to the migration studies that have explored the discretionary nature of practices such as *stop and search* (Amnesty International, 2014), particularly at borders and in local neighbourhoods. These interventions involve wide margins of judgment for frontline officers, who decide whom to stop based on residency status or suspected offences.

The young residents of Vicofaro, however, describe these street checks as habitual, almost casual. K. puts it like this:

> The police often stop you in the street, especially in the park at night. I'm there, just sitting on a bench, and they come up to check. Sometimes they ask if you're from Vicofaro, but they don't ask me anymore as they already know. They say, "Are you from Vicofaro?" and I answer, "Yes, but

I live in Porta San Marco [a CAS facility]", and they say, "All right, go ahead".

In this light, the urban boundary of Vicofaro assumes a double role. First, it is violated, both physically and symbolically, by raids sparked by public reports. Then, it gets reenacted and legitimised by law enforcement through everyday policing practices that no longer seem to require justification, while also highlighting the embodiment of the border within the human being.

A final contribution from K. reveals another pattern of police interaction:

> Sometimes people come here because they've been told to leave, and they have nowhere else to go. If you're hungry, you come here and eat. If you need to sleep, you come here and sleep. Then the municipal police come looking for them: if they find the person, they take them to jail for a while. After that, the person either returns or goes elsewhere.

This description of targeted roundups to locate individuals reported by police headquarters, and typically those with pending charges, coincides with Don Biancalani's assertion of his special relationship with the upper ranks of law enforcement. It suggests a quasi-clientelist dynamic involving what we have described as street-level or frontline bureaucrats, whose actions are shaped as much by interpersonal relations as by official protocols. The complexity deepens as we consider how Vicofaro navigates its entanglement with the apparatus tasked with addressing administrative irregularity. What emerges is a fluid and shifting structure, where it is not uncommon to see hierarchical models for immigration control surpassed or bypassed altogether (Franceschetti, 2010).

Another form of clientelism, as we call it here to indicate the mutual alignment of interests, can be found in Don Biancalani's relationship with social services, both local and external. This too, he attributes entirely to the distinctiveness of the Vicofaro "model". As he puts it:

> It's very difficult to replicate this at the institutional level, it's a model that allows us to reach the most excluded. Even in Florence, Caritas has no idea who's in Le Cascine, not even the social workers! They're the ones who come to us for information, even from Florence.

The reflection on street-level bureaucracy surrounding Vicofaro's reception experience underscores an element that might initially seem irrelevant when viewed solely through a political lens. But as shown by the informal forces orbiting the site, trust becomes an increasingly important factor in understanding the position this experiment occupies at the local, regional, and even national levels.

Conclusions

The reflection on the various forms of migrant irregularity emerges as a political identity (De Genova, 2002), situated within a legal system which, far from being neutral, operates as an apparatus of control and coercion (Gramsci, 1975). Irregularity becomes a condition produced by the market and, more crucially, by the law itself, one that is destined to perpetuate over time through processes of labelling and exclusion (Luhmann, 1993; Luhmann, 1985).

It is therefore unsurprising that even the notion of legality, as employed in this analysis, loses its aura of incontrovertibility. Instead, it is approached as an institution born out of a specific function, or more accurately, as a social construct rooted in institutional order (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). A similar critical lens can be applied to the concept of the border, which is continuously reproduced through processes of securitisation and criminalisation. While the link between law and border might initially appear relevant simply due to their shared application within the realm of migration and human mobility, it is precisely through a close reading of a given historical context that the structural affinities between these two emerge: both belong to what Agamben (2005) terms "the original fiction of sovereignty", and both serve as its operative instruments.

Both law and the border exhibit signs of the same autopoietic logic which, according to Luhmann, would be imperilled if the system failed in its imperative to achieve integration at all costs. Should this occur, the entire framework of networks and geometries operating along the inclusion/exclusion continuum would lose coherence, risking systemic collapse. This collapse, in turn, is forestalled through the conscious and unconscious participation of those subjects deemed deviant in relation

to dominant social expectations, what Luhmann refers to as the third dimension of deviation.

Borders, then, constitute a locus where the relationship between law and territory, and between law and the subject, reveals its insufficiencies and paradoxes under the pressure of resistance and disruption (Rigo, 2008). Yet borders also remind us that it is possible to exceed the regulatory and governmental capacities imposed upon them. They open the way to attempts at reclaiming space and re-signifying relationships (Queirolo Palmas and Rajola 2018 in Dedlich and Pitzalis, eds., 2021).

ANNEX I – Map of the urban informal settlement of Santa Maria Maggiore, in Vicofaro
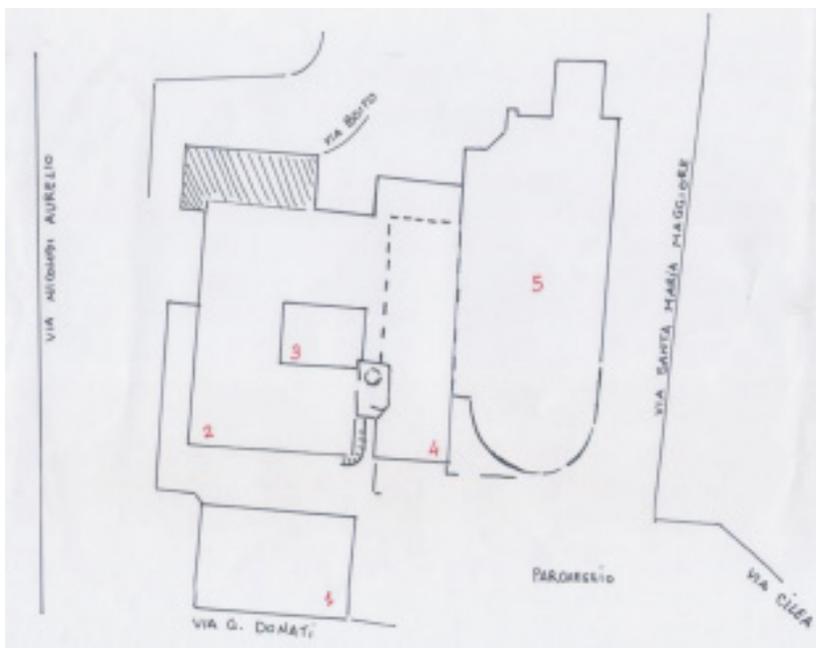
Legend

1. Outdoor courtyard, gathering place for the residents of Vicofaro
2. Housing unit distributed over two floors; part of the so-called "old" church complex. The upper floor hosts dozens of beds used by members of the community from SWANA countries; the lower floor includes other beds, a kitchen and the legal support office
3. Cloister
4. Oldest section of the Santa Maria Maggiore church, including the bell tower. The bell tower is used as a bicycle parking area, while the historic structure housed an Italian literacy school run by volunteers for years
5. New church of Santa Maria Maggiore, providing dozens of beds, primarily to people from sub-Saharan Africa

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Reframing the right to the city: feminist counter-spatialities and practices of resistance[1,2]
Virginia Musso, Valentina Novak, Giulia Piazza and Irene Terenzi[3]

Introduction

How does power shape urban space, and how do bodies – particularly those shaped by gender, race, class, and other intersecting social categories – navigate and contest the forms of exclusion and control it produces? This paper explores the entanglement between bodies and urban environments, focusing on how space unfolds, not only as a material ground but also as a site of socio-spatial exclusion, where certain subjectivities are marginalized, rendered invisible, or made to feel out of place. Yet these same spaces are also traversed by practices of resistance that challenge hegemonic orders and open up possibilities for resignification, making the right to the city (Lefebvre, 2014) a contested ground shaped by everyday acts of negotiation, disruption, and transformation. Through the lens of a feminist perspective, we interrogate the relationship between

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1. Within the framework of a jointly conceived paper, the writing of the sections is attributed as follows: Virginia Musso and Giulia Piazza wrote *Introduction* and *Concluding Reflections*, Virginia Musso wrote the section *Bodies, Boundaries, and the City: Tracing Geographies of Power*; Giulia Piazza wrote the section *From Bodies to Territories: Reclaiming Space for Social Reproduction*; Valentina Novak wrote the section *Performative and symbolic resignification of public spaces*; Irene Terenzi wrote *Dissident Bodies in Urban Space: Practices of Appearance and Aesthetic-Affective Strategies*.

2. Translation note: All interview excerpts and non-English citations appearing in this article were translated by the authors, with careful attention to preserving theoretical nuances and the participants' original meanings. Where applicable, key terms have been maintained in their original language alongside English translations to honor their conceptual specificity.

3. Virginia Musso is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology and Social Research at the University of Milano-Bicocca. Valentina Novak is an independent professional. Giulia Piazza is co-founder of piazzarchitettura. Irene Terenzi is a Research Collaborator at the University of Florence.

space and body as socially and politically co-constructed. In this light, the right to the city is understood not merely as a matter of accessibility, but as a struggle over meaning, presence, and recognition – connected to an intertwining of multiple axes of domination. Although centered on feminist and gender-based dynamics, this work acknowledges their intertwining with broader social axes, from which plural experiences of urban exclusion and resistance emerge. It is not within the scope of this paper to account for all dimensions involved; rather, we aim to highlight the convergence of these axes – how they reinforce one another and how resistance, too, often emerges through coalition, interdependence, and shared affective and political struggles. We aim to critically examine how feminist and intersectional activist collectives engage with urban space through embodied and symbolic actions that challenge hegemonic spatial settings. To do so, we shared the space of the paper with the activists centering their voices, the practices they enact, the communities they build, and the forms of resistance they inhabit: our focus on feminist actors in Palermo and Padua is thus meant as a situated entry point into these wider structures of inequality, foregrounding the authors' own urban experiences and positionality.

Our reflection unfolds in four movements. First, we outline the theoretical foundations of the body-space nexus. Drawing on Foucault, Butler, and Bourdieu, we explore how both categories are shaped by power relations that normalize certain presences while marginalizing others, and how these mechanisms of power produce normative boundaries and hierarchies. This section serves to define the theoretical lens through which we interpret the concrete local experiences explored in the following pages. The second section investigates the relationship between reproductive injustice and urban space, focusing on body-centered political practices through the experience of the feminist collective *Non è Un Veleno* from Palermo, whom we interview. The third section addresses the symbolic dimension of public space, examining its performative re-signification through practices that challenge dominant representations – such as odonymic interventions – and includes an interview with Emiliana Losma, who curated the historical research underpinning a resignification performance held in Padua in 2024. The fourth section discusses the use of tactical frivolity in feminist protests, reading it as a form of insurgent performativity that disrupts dominant spatial codes through irony, cre-

ativity, and embodied presence. Finally, the conclusion reflects on how these feminist spatial practices function as laboratories of counter-spatiality, opening up new ways to claim the city and reimagine its futures. The three central sections of the article are in dialogue with one another while maintaining a certain autonomy, as distinct yet interrelated emanations – spatial, symbolic, and performative – emerging from the same matrix of domination. The aim of the paper is to weave a patchwork of practices and voices that reveal the pervasiveness of the dialectic between oppression and resistance.

Bodies, boundaries, and the city: tracing geographies of power

Rejecting the notion of their natural or spontaneous emergence, our perspective understands body and space as shaped by dominant social, economic, and ideological systems. Through the centre-margin dialectic, these systems impose homogeneity, individualise differences, establish norms, and define deviations (Foucault, 2020), drawing boundaries that reflect a differential distribution of vulnerability (Butler, 2021). Within this framework, marginalisation can be understood as forms of socio-spatial exclusion that go beyond the material dimension of territories and operate directly on certain kinds of bodies. To further develop the relationship between space, body, and marginality, this section examines how power is materially inscribed in space (Lefebvre, 1991; 2014), how urban environments reflect and reproduce relations of domination (Foucault, 2020), and how power both produces bodies (Butler, 2013) and becomes embedded within them (Bourdieu, 2019).

A pioneer in showing that urban morphology is a historical and social product shaped by time and dominant ideologies, Henri Lefebvre interprets the production of the city as a creative process inseparable from the exercise of political power. In *The Right to the City* (2014), he outlines how social and spatial transformations are co-constitutive. Tracing urban evolution from Eastern cities to the Greek *polis* – where collective land ownership and the agora reflected a political order based on the exclusion of women, slaves, and foreigners – Lefebvre then turns to the Roman city, where the spread of the villa model introduced private property and a fragmented relationship with nature. After the fall of the Empire, the

medieval city emerges, shaped by growing productive forces, a hierarchical city-countryside relation, and the centrality of commerce in urban life. The market square, which replaces earlier political spaces such as the agora and the forum, anticipates the model that would later be consolidated in the industrial city (Engels, 1845; Soja, 2000), in the Fordist city (Dear, 2002), and, ultimately, in the contemporary capitalist city (Harvey, 2005): «the terrain where some of the new conditions characterising the 21st century are realised» (Sassen, 2006, p. 1). In this sense, today's cities can be seen as spatial translations of the multiple, interconnected crises of the present (Fraser, 2023).

Having synthetically described space as an ideological product, it is now necessary to consider its active role in enacting that same ideology. The relationship between society and space is not unidirectional: it is not only that society is expressed in space, but also that space plays a formative role in shaping social relations. In this sense, «buildings [...] are not only a tangible image of the society that produces them, but are also tools for shaping social attitudes» (Borghi and Camuffo, 2010, p. 132), contributing to the regulation of bodies through spatial logics that reproduce and reinforce social hierarchies. Urban space is thus designed, managed, and transformed in ways that guide the cultural, economic, and social dynamics it hosts. The power relations embedded in public space shape access to action and freedom, either expanding or constraining the possibilities available to different subjects (Castelli, 2019). Within this framework, Michel Foucault's work is particularly illuminating, as it demonstrates that space is not only a product of power but also a means through which power is exercised and reproduced. In *Discipline and Punish* (2020), he describes a form of power that does not merely repress, but actively produces subjects, knowledge, and spaces. Diffuse and decentralised, this power operates through everyday practices and institutions – such as schools, prisons, barracks, and factories – which regulate bodies in part through their spatial location. In this sense, space itself emerges as an active vector of power that reinforces systems of control and shapes subjectivity. Although Foucault focuses on specific institutional spaces, his conceptual and analytical framework can be applied to contemporary forms of segregation and marginalisation – such as those found in ghettos or urban peripheries – as expressions of the same violent logic. In this perspective, space is not merely a container but a material operator

of power: a means through which behaviour is shaped, inequalities are structured, and concrete forms of control are exercised over lives and bodies, which are now interpreted as social products.

Similarly to urban space, the body too can be interpreted as a biological-social hybrid, shaped by the material and symbolic conditions of its existence. Far from being a natural given, the body is continually shaped by power relations, which are «social categories that no one can choose [that] cross the given body in various ways, and gender, for example, names precisely this crossing» (Butler, 2017, p. 154). Like space, the body possesses a materiality upon which axes of power intersect, embodying not only the object of control but also the very site of its reproduction. Drawing on Foucault, Butler emphasizes the constitutive dimension of power, asserting that power shapes the subject, defining the fundamental conditions of its being and the paths of its desire; thus, «power is no longer, or not only, that which we oppose, but also, in a strong sense, that on which our existence depends and that which we take in and hold in our being» (Butler, 2013, p. 41). This means that power does not merely repress from the outside, but also constitutes the subject from within, shaping its desires, possibilities of existence, and configurations of identity. Power, therefore, is not only what we resist but also what we depend on and internalise. This dimension of internalisation, however, should not lead to an intimist, abstract, or merely symbolic interpretation of power. As Pierre Bourdieu observes regarding gender oppression, power «culminates and is fulfilled in a profound and lasting transformation of bodies (and brains)» (2019, p. 45) that is, through a practical process that shapes and enforces distinct norms about how the body can be legitimately used, especially regarding sexuality. From this perspective, the processes of masculinisation and feminisation are configured as symbolic and material systems that, while appearing natural, are historically produced and socially constructed. The implicit assumption of androcentrism as the dominant interpretative framework translates into internalised bodily dispositions – such as clothing, posture, or behaviour – that generate habitus that are both differentiated and differentiating, embodying diversity while actively producing social distinctions based on a binary logic, thereby somatizing relations of domination.

Space and body are understood analogically as products of hegemonic power relations that, through the centre-margin dialectic, enact process-

es of inclusion and exclusion to the detriment of subjectivities deemed a-normal or a-normalised, or actively constructed as such through power relations. Viewing the city through this lens reveals a pervasive network of power that legitimises only certain bodies to move through particular spaces, inhabit specific neighbourhoods, and access designated services. In this process of marginalisation, the role of spatial planning proves crucial. As Sandercock sharply observes, planners have historically controlled the production and use of space, acting as regulators who decide who can occupy or use certain places and when. They enforce exclusionary measures such as closing parks at night to displace the homeless, banning street vending, denying mosque construction permits, restricting housing renovations and invented cruel ways «to keep certain bodies (branded bodies, marked by colour, race, gender, sexual preference, and physical ability) out of sight and off the streets and away from housing areas from certain other kinds of bodies» (Sandercock, 2004, p. 37). By highlighting the link between body and space, Sandercock provides an interpretative key to articulate the concept of socio-spatial marginalisation. The space of the margin is not only the visible, tangible one found in suburbs, borders, or the specific sites described by Foucault, but also the enacted process of spatial expulsion that renders certain bodies unwelcome and excluded. Maintaining a Foucauldian gaze, one can observe how the power of the norm enacts this exclusion in a diffuse and pervasive manner, structuring the city as a selective space – pleasantly habitable for some subjects, yet hostile, repelling, and impractical for others. Understood as a concrete projection of power relations onto the territory (Lefebvre, 2014), the city's map thus becomes a map of inequalities, where the margins are not confined to the edges but permeate the entire urban space, manifesting wherever normative power excludes, selects, and disciplines. Margins, therefore, are not only physical peripheries but also material and symbolic infrastructures operating ontologically, discriminating subjectivities by their very existence and rendering them visibly and structurally surplus to the norm. Viewing the centre-periphery dialectic beyond the tangible, the margin emerges as a relational, not merely physical, concept. Post- and decolonial perspectives critically expose the binary and hierarchical structure of the *us/them* opposition, revealing how it underpins multiple forms of domination and marginalisation. In this sense, «all European cities can be defined as postcolonial. Every city is postcolonial insofar

as practices of colonial domination persist that do not necessarily relate back to the colonial period but rather to the colonial mentality» (Borghi and Camuffo, 2010, p. 137). Thus, a colonial presence in the traditional sense is therefore not necessary for the implementation of colonial logics: these can persist through mentalities, symbolic devices, and administrative practices, sustaining a hierarchical relationship between centre and periphery, even in its socio-cultural expression (*Ibidem*). From these often-invisible margins emerge practices of resistance and reappropriation, as the following pages will illustrate. The heterogeneous constellation of practices we present configures counter-spatialities that unsettle dynamics of control and rearticulate the right to the city through a feminist perspective.

From bodies to territories: reclaiming space for social reproduction

Among these counter-spatialities, and according to the analogical understanding of space and body, some explicitly challenge the long-standing capitalist appropriation of reproductive labor and the spatial disciplining of bodies. One of the primary consequences of capitalist modernity's election as the dominant regulatory and organizational system of life has been the capitalization of women's bodies – conceived both as producers of labor power and as providers of unpaid care work, «performed within the context of the heteronormative nuclear family» (Dalla Costa and James, 1972). Feminism frames this as reproductive labor, as opposed to the productive one, historically carried out by men within the work market. This capitalization has also entailed the need to appropriate forms of control over life reproduction, including contraception and sexual regulation – previously autonomously managed by women themselves (Federici, 2004).

The capitalization of women's bodies and labor is deeply intertwined with their removal from public space and the deprivation of their familial and collective support networks, thereby relegating them to isolated domesticity (Hayden, 1982). Over time, we have witnessed not only the distancing of women from informal infrastructures for bodily autonomy but also from public and constitutional welfare infrastructures. The

spatial implications of these socioeconomic processes are profound, both because they have historically signified the feminization of the domestic sphere and the exclusion of women from the public one – with significant consequences for urban ecosystems' balance and livability[4] – and because they have exposed hierarchies and inequalities in the distribution of services and wealth across territories. Indeed, while subjectivities close to urban centers enjoy easier access to public wealth services, those living in peripheral or rural areas suffer further exclusion and marginalization, reflecting the multiple layers of discrimination enacted by racist, classist, patriarchal culture. As hooks (2014, n.d.) recounts:

> To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. [...] Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town.

hooks helps to envision how the spatial logic of dormitory neighborhoods contributes to isolation and segregation, as this spaces lack – or are severely deficient in – quality public services and spaces that facilitate the establishment of care and mutual support networks, as well as the infrastructures for easily accessing essential services, such as information regarding health, sexual and reproductive rights. Planning territories and cities without considering the needs of all subjectivities effectively denies equal conditions to the demands of the reproductive work compared to the productive one (Muxì Martinez, 2011), rendering invisible the contributions of what Stefania Barca calls *forces of reproduction* (Barca, 2020). According to the author, who engages «simultaneously with the different dimensions of hegemonic master rationality: class, gender, race, and species» (Ivi, p. 89), generativity must be understood not as labor necessarily tied to female bodies but as «a network composed of biological, social,

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4. Urban planning, by failing to account for the needs of subjectivities oppressed along gendered, racial, class-based, and sexual orientation lines, has produced self-referential and segregating spaces. These are incompatible with reproductive ecologies and thus ill-suited to the demands of everyday life. See: *¿Qué aporta la perspectiva de género al urbanismo?* (Muxì Martinez, 2011).

and cultural elements» (Ivi, p. 84), sustained by more-than-human bodies and ecologies that mutually influence one another.

Ecofeminism and queer ecologies (Sandilands, 2016) converge in this regard, expanding the notion of *reproductive work* beyond the labor of generating new life to include the sustaining labor and intrinsic capacities of all subjectivities that care for the Earth and its regeneration. In doing so, they destabilize the foundational binaries of modernity – male/female, nature/culture, and production/reproduction – precisely to reject what Barca (2020, p. 89) calls «the master model of modernity as the only possible form of human coexistence on the planet». Central to this critique is the Indigenous feminist concept of *cuerpo-territorio*[5], which rejects hegemonic dualisms to reframe the body as both a site of colonial oppression and a space of resistance. This concept explicitly names the violent extractive and colonial relations capitalism imposes on Global South territories and the bodies inhabiting them – particularly Indigenous and feminized subjectivities (Ulloa, 2017) – while affirming their ecological interdependence and right to self-determination (Mies and Shiva, 1993).

This critical framework reveals why global feminist struggles for reproductive rights demand urgent engagement: by centering the body's right to self-determination, they establish a foundational claim against the objectification, commodification and extractivist logic of capitalist productivism – a claim that extends to all living beings.

To further explore these reflections, the following interview[6], with activists from *Non è Un Veleno*[7] examines their forms of territorial and collective resistance, grounded in the association's own practice. Based in Palermo, the organization has established a key care hub for sexual and reproductive rights within the city. In doing so, it renders visible how broad national inequalities – namely, Italy's persistent North-South gap and its stark territorial disparity in access to welfare (Asso, Nerozzi and

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5. The genealogy of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) emerges from communitarian feminist thought and movement across Abya Yala. The term theorizes the inextricable linkages between Indigenous bodies and ancestral lands as contested sites of colonial and exctractive violence and as ground of resistance. See for more: *Cuidado y defensa de los territorios-naturalezas: mujeres indígenas y soberanía alimentaria en Colombia* (Ulloa, 2017).

6. The interview was collectively conducted on June 16th 2025 by the authors.

7. For more information, visit: Chi siamo - Non è un veleno

Pipitone 2021) – are concretely experienced and contested at the local level.

> *Authors:* «*Words create and destroy spaces; they build and annihilate ideas and opinions*»: this is how you denounced the 2020 misinformation campaign by the Pro Vita & Famiglia association, which disseminated posters attacking the RU-486 pill[8]. What socio-political needs and reflections led to the creation of Non è Un Veleno and what practices does it enact?

Non è Un Veleno: The idea to create a counter-campaign in response to Pro Vita e Famiglia's misinformation posters – whose slogan stated: «Would you ever take poison? Stop the abortion pill RU-486, it puts women's health and lives at risk and kills the child in the womb» – was born from the political need to redesign the spaces we move through every day, to make them safe for women and the marginalised communities who inhabit our city. In this case, we occupied the public space by putting up posters with a "counter-message": «RU-486 ensures safe abortion, it is not poison. The real poison is misinformation».

Key needs are that of requiring clear, scientific information about sexual and reproductive health (which no one teaches us, given the absence of sex education in schools) and of holding (wealthy) anti-choice movements accountable as they continue to oppress our choices and decide over our bodies, turning our spaces into hostile, misinformed places. These needs drive our practice and have led us to create a national network that enabled other activists to put up the same Non è Un Veleno posters in their own cities.

Our political reflection also stems from the fact that abortion has always been censored and made invisible. It has never occupied a place in the public space. We believed we couldn't allow the only narrative on the streets to be yet another attempt to control and guilt trip those who choose self-determination. While we filed a legal complaint against the NGO for spreading false and misleading information (making it downloadable and accessible to all collectives who wanted to follow our example), we also believe that disseminating scientifically verified information is a tool to strip abortion of its traumatic rhetoric and bring it back to what it really is: a medical practice.

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8. Referred to in Italy as RU-486, mifepristone is the primary pharmaceutical agent used in medical abortion procedures. IVG (voluntary termination of pregnancy) is regulated in Italy by the law n. 194 of 1978. For more information visit: Abortire in Italia - Non è un veleno

Since then, Non è Un Veleno has worked to do the following:

- produce informative materials on sexual and reproductive health, which we make available to the whole community;
- launch sex and relationships education programmes in schools;
- provide consultations between members of the community and socio-health SRHR professionals;
- fund psychotherapy sessions for sexual disorders;
- arrange gynecological visits at private practices with a transfeminist approach (the gynecologists are trained by us in transfeminist care);
- support young people who contact our helpline with doubts stemming from inexperience and lack of sex education;
- map safe and accessible healthcare services and facilities without conscientious objectors (including pharmacies that refuse to sell the morning-after pill to minors due to ignorance of new AIFA regulations, leading us to train pharmacists) and direct members of the community to these services.

We place the concept of care as a political act at the centre of our work.

A: Why did you feel the need to bring Non è Un Veleno's support services to peripheral areas? In your experience, how are marginalised territories and the bodies inhabiting them subjected to compounded, violent exclusion from their rights?

NèUV: The lack of access to sexual and reproductive healthcare constitutes a true form of violence. Sicily is both inherently peripheral and Italy's largest region and when this is combined with the scarcity of mobility infrastructure, some areas turn into 'periferies within periferies', which are thus completely isolated. The deeper one moves into peripheral or inland areas, the scarcer the counselling centres, abortion clinics, support spaces and care services become, while the issues we deal with grow increasingly taboo.

For example, in Palermo and its province, there are about 40 counselling centres: 1 centre per 30,000 residents (while the law requires 1 per 20,000), making them insufficient. As a result, accessing services involves long waiting lists and little time for user education. Moreover, in small towns it's even harder to speak freely about one's sexuality or feel comfortable asking questions about things like sexually transmitted infections, contraception or the morning-after pill.

When you combine this isolation with the lack of connections between peripheral towns and neighborhoods and the city, barriers to information and services multiply.

For these reasons, with the goal of bringing the margins to the centre, we decided to create a mobile unit staffed by activists, sexologists, midwives and gynecologists. This way we at least guarantee access to free consultations, disseminate information about gender-based violence, consent, STIs, abortion procedures, contraceptives, etc., and provide free barrier contraceptives, pregnancy tests and STI prevention information.

A: You have employed mapping as a tool to construct counter-spatialities – what do the collected data and mapping experiences reveal about territorialised forms of domination and inequality?

NèUV: Over these years, we've mapped Sicilian hospitals that provide abortion services (IVG) to respond to daily requests for information and abortion accompaniment, directing people to places without conscientious objector doctors; time is crucial when it comes to abortion. Through this mapping, we've been able to witness firsthand how dire the situation is – 81.5% of gynecologists in Sicily are conscientious objectors (2022 data from the Italian Health Ministry on the implementation of Law n. 194).

Beyond the absence of information on hospital websites, we've verified the absence of abortion services in Agrigento, Caltanissetta, and – when the only non-objector doctor is unavailable – even Messina. Some hospitals refuse to adopt the pharmacological method – the safest and fastest option for patients who can avoid surgical intervention and also the most cost-effective method for the national health service (this is the case in Catania, the region's second most populous city).

What we do is facilitate access to information, act as watchdogs, accompany women and individuals who request our support, and train ourselves in accompaniment practices to protect both ourselves and the

patients, thanks to the national grassroots mutual aid networks we've strengthened over the years.

A: Working on reproductive issues today challenges the culture that directed us toward class struggle outside the home, shifting the focus to spaces where collective care practices and their political value are shared. What have you learned from the spaces built by and around Non è Un Veleno over these years? How has your community constituted itself as an autonomous field of struggle and resistance?

NèUV: We've learned that deconstruction is indeed individual work, but when practiced and processed collectively as we seven members of the Non è Un Veleno collective do, it gains a transformative power – a power that spreads, that prevents us from surrendering, that becomes capable of engaging even those outside our circle. We've learned how to 'do'. To create networks, amplify connections, perceive needs and consequently adapt our work to meet them.

Our campaign was born on the streets, and it has evolved over time on social media (where we now receive requests for abortion access). Our physical, territorial presence among people continues to yield exponential returns: creating events, returning to the streets with information stands and attending festivals or gathering places where face-to-face conversation is possible is fundamental in conveying the meaning of this transfeminist struggle. It enables us to recruit volunteers and plant seeds of resistance against the injustices perpetrated by the patriarchal system in this society that we're trying to transform.

While *Non è Un Veleno* experience reveals how feminist groups reclaim bodily and reproductive autonomy through spatial practices, the next pages highlight a continuum of feminist counter-spatialities, extending this reflection to symbolic and performative dimensions of urban space.

Performative and symbolic resignification of public spaces

Building on these body-centered political practices, we now turn to the symbolic reconfiguration of urban space as another crucial terrain of feminist struggle. If the body is a site where norms are inscribed and contested, public space becomes the stage where these contestations are made

visible, re-signified, and collectively inhabited. In this regard, we propose performative odonymy practices as a compelling example of symbolic re-signification. The dictionary defines it as the «set of street names, both with concrete reference to a specific area or locality and with regard to the choice or manner of their formation» (Treccani). However, drawing on critical toponymy – as we aim to emphasize – odonymy functions less as a neutral system of spatial orientation or historical-cultural testimony, and more as a mechanism that reflects and reproduces existing power structures (Gallia, Muti and Pecorelli, 2023). The *Mapping Diversity pro-ject*[9] analyzed 155,468 streets across 32 European cities, revealing that over 90% (56,852) are named after men. Among the cities involved in the study, 3,088 out of 5,247 streets are dedicated to individual women, most of whom are religious figures. A gender-focused analysis in Italy reveals similar disparities: according to the same study by *European Data Journalism*, only 6.6% of streets are dedicated to women. Out of the 24,572 streets named after individuals in 21 regional and provincial capitals, only 1,626 streets are dedicated to women, and only 959 if saintly figures are excluded (Corona, 2023).

Drawing on these data, we are prompted to ask: «If we imagined the city as a text, what story would we read?» (Fantò, Muti, Pecorelli, 2021). The pronounced disproportion not only mirrors societal power asymmetries but also perpetuates – in a very concrete but also symbolic manner – gender marginalization. Beyond its merely orientational function, the commemorative naming of places and streets operates as a narrative practice that reflects and conveys historical, moral and identity-based values shared by a social group within a specific spatio-temporal context. In this sense, odonymy functions as a symbolic device of memory and a representation of a particular worldview, developed by hegemonic groups, those who hold the power to establish who is commemorated and visible in the urban space. It is therefore unsurprising that most dedications are reserved for men belonging to dominant power groups. As Gallia, Muti, and Pecorelli (2023, p. 7) note «Commemorative odonymy has (and gives) the power to transform time into space».

Spatially, the city is a web, a network of information, narratives, and stories that, even in their absence, have the power to reveal societal in-

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9. Mapping Diversity

equalities. If space is not neutral, neither is odonymy, as it operates as a device that reproduces imaginaries and reinforces hierarchies. Moreover, it reflects the idea that urban space is the prerogative of groups who hold power (Belotti, 2016). As Corona (2023) observes, «it is no coincidence that, from the French Revolution to the Black Lives Matter protests, political demands for change have been accompanied by symbolic moments related to the renaming of streets, squares, and other urban spaces». If interpreted as such, odonymy is a symbolic battleground where historically marginalized and excluded people and groups can be made visible and, spatially, claim the right to the city (Fantò, Muti, Pecorelli, 2021). In both Europe and Italy, a series of "counter-odonymy" practices emerged, aimed at centering counter-narratives by renaming and re-signifying places, and recovering memories excluded by dominant discourses. These practices include the concealment of existing plaques, the installation of supplementary informative panels, proposals for new dedications, and performative acts of re-significations (*ibidem*). Through initiatives and experiences such as FèmiCité, which renamed around sixty streets after contemporary Parisian women, the renaming of metro stations in Brussels, the Italian project *Toponomastica Femminile* focused on mapping and raising awareness, different odonymy practices are increasingly spreading.

To further explore this latter approach and understand the dynamics it entails, we present an interview with independent researcher and historian Emiliana Losma, who curated a historical research project on female figures underlying a resignification performance held in Padua in 2024. The interview was preceded by a dialogue[10] together with Grazia Di Sisto, which allowed us to frame this practice within a broader set of symbolic and performative acts of urban space resignification, that extend beyond odonymy and the gender dimension alone. Indeed, when considered alongside other activist interventions – such as the installation of signs marking pedestrian crossings dangerous for visually impaired or blind people – these practices reveal an intersectional approach to reclaiming urban space. In Padua, odonymy also played a key role in the project *Decolonize Your Eyes* (2020), developed within the Visual Research Methods laboratory at the University of Padua. Combining artistic, performative,

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10. The interview was collectively conducted on June 19th 2025 by the authors.

and participatory tools – most notably a participatory video[11] and two public events – the initiative aims to expose and critically engage with the visual and symbolic traces of Italian colonialism[12], involving various local organizations in the process (Frisina, Tesfau and Frisina, n.d).

Authors: What symbolic value do you attribute to odonymy, and why did you choose this field as a site of struggle? What political value do you assign to renaming places? Which dominant narrative does this practice aim to counter (particularly in relation to the invisibilization of non-conforming and non-normative bodies in public space)?

Emiliana Losma: Renaming places, for me, means re-narrating history by performing an act of justice: naming the many women who made history across a wide range of fields, in opposition to a patriarchal power system that sought to confine them to the private sphere, keep them uneducated, and treat them as property of men.

A: What dimensions do you attribute to your practice? Does it pertain to a symbolic sphere, artistic performance, communicative counter-narrative, or ritual to be periodically repeated...? In your view, what is the relationship between performance, space, and politics?

EL: As far as I'm concerned, it is all of the above: an artistic and communicative performance that takes shape as a counter-narrative, until there is a rebalancing in the telling of History. This does not mean assigning quotas of any kind, but recognizing that Women's History is History for everyone, that these women are fully part of the history of Padua, and that they must be remembered and acknowledged as a legacy for the present and the future. And so, until the institutions take responsibility for this legacy, actions like these – repeated periodically – will be necessary to shift the opinion of the majority, for whom these issues are still not seen as truly important.

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11. Decolonize your eyes / Decolonizzare la città

12. Other significant mappings that make colonialist topographies visible include, for instance: Postcolonial Italy and Yekatit 12 | Febbraio 19. Zerai Deres, una mappa e una data per agire la memoria. - Giap

A: How did you select the figures to be made visible, to whom the plaques are dedicated? What were the criteria and logics behind the selection of figures and locations?

EL: Fourteen women were selected for their connection to the city of Padua – whether by birth or by having lived there. These include: Elena Lucrezia Cornaro (the first woman in the world to earn a university degree), Caterina Dolfin (poet, political and cultural salonnière, and patron of the University of Padua), Gualberta Alaide Beccari (activist and writer, founder of La donna magazine), Milla Baldo Ceolin (physicist), Mariasilvia Spolato (LGBTQIA+ activist), Bettina d'Andrea (jurist), Camilla Erculiani (pharmacist), Teresa Cibele Legnazzi and Leonilde Longo Calvi (patriots), Mariarosa Dalla Costa (sociologist and feminist), Lidia Martini (partisan), Sibilla de Cetto (philanthropist and entrepreneur), Rosa Piazza (pedagogue), and Vittoria Aganoor (poet). These women represent a wide range of fields – literature, sociology, science, political, feminist and LGBTQIA+ activism – and lived across different centuries (from the 1300s to today), offering a small yet powerful glimpse into the female protagonism of the city. The plaques were installed in symbolically significant places linked to these women: homes where they lived, places where they worked, institutions they helped found, archives that preserve their documents, and even places from which women were historically excluded – such as the University itself. The practice also sought to highlight the relationships among these women – for example, the plaque dedicated to Caterina Dolfin, patron of the University of Padua, was placed alongside that of Elena Lucrezia Cornaro, in reference to the fact that Dolfin was responsible for the installation of Cornaro's statue at Palazzo Bo.

A: How was the practice received, and what reactions did it provoke (curiosity, conflict…)? What effects has it produced (engagement with the public, dialogue with local authorities, new projects)?

EL: In my view, the impact was very positive. Although there were some sarcastic, mocking, or dismissive reactions, they were far outweighed by the number of people who expressed appreciation, gratitude, and who asked for similar actions to be carried out in other parts of Italy. This is a key aspect for increasing the impact of the practice: promoting the recognition of women's contributions to history in ways that affect the present – challenging discrimination and stereotypes, and inspiring current and future generations.

Building on an engagement with situated practices, this study has highlighted the symbolic dimension of processes that re-signify public space through odonymy. The discussion then moves on to examine another form of counter-spatiality, emerging from performative practices in public spaces, such as those associated with tactical frivolity.

Dissenting bodies in urban space: practices of appearance and aesthetic-affective strategies

After exploring the spatial and symbolic forms of control over spaces and bodies, the following section focuses on how the body becomes a performative instrument of dissent within public space, particularly through collective and performative appearance (Butler, 2017). We thus interpret performativity as a strategy of presence, through which aiming to understand how the affective visibility of non-conforming bodies transforms urban space into a site of resistance and political resignification. In an era where public space is regulated and surveilled through norms of control and security apparatus (Koskela, 2000; Hagmann, 2017), certain invisibilized subjectivities may respond with bodily practices of rupture, disorder, and disobedience. Within this framework, decorum policies – municipal ordinances, forced evictions, video surveillance, disciplined aesthetics – operate as tools of spatial exclusion and social regulation (Bukowski, 2019). Far from being neutral, these measures selectively target marginalized bodies: women, trans people, migrants, sex workers, homeless people, and others marked as deviant. Invoking public decency, they legitimize a hierarchical urban order by normalizing certain presences while rendering others invisible. As Pitch (2013) argues, decorum operates not only as an aesthetic norm but also as a political tool in the neoliberal governance of the city. The rhetoric of order and cleanliness mobilizes moral categories to distinguish "worthy" bodies from "indecorous" ones, disciplining access to public space and reinforcing exclusionary urban geographies. This normative apparatus finds recent expression in the Italian context with the *Decreto Sicurezza*[13], which intensifies the

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13. We refer to Decreto Legge 11 April 2025, n. 48, converted into Law 9 June 2025, n. 80. For more, see: TESTO COORDINATO DEL DECRETO-LEGGE 11 aprile 2025, n. 48

criminalization of dissents, aligning with a global trend where urban security policies are increasingly deployed to suppress protest and political expression, especially in public space. The repression of demonstrations has sparked widespread and cross-cutting mobilizations, contesting not only the punitive measures themselves but the broader normative and symbolic framework that legitimizes them.

Within this framework, transfeminist and dissenting performative practices that traverse and unsettle marginalized spaces acquire radical relevance. Such practices do not merely inhabit space; they expose and subvert its normative, affective and symbolic architecture, revealing the structurally violent foundations of urban order. Drawing on transfeminist and queer thought (Butler, 2017; Preciado, 2020), the body is understood as a spatialized construct – shaped by cis-heteropatriarchal, racialized, and neoliberal logics – rather than a pre-political given. It is the perceived excess of these bodies and desires – non-conforming, sexualized, racialized – that neglects the apparently neutral and pacified surface (Pitch, 2013) of the urban norms of decorum. They propose instead the re-articulation of urban space as a site of political and collective relations. As Butler (2017) argues, the assembly of bodies in public space is a performative act that puts into practice the *right of appearance,* defying the silencing of those bodies deemed non-conforming. To appear publicly is to assert one's existence as political subjects, while also exposing oneself to the risk of symbolic or material violence, especially for marginalized subjectivities. From this perspective, the body becomes a contested terrain, charged with affects and power relations: a political space in itself (Preciado, 2020). Performativity thus emerges as a practice of existence and resistance: an embodied intervention that unsettles boundaries between public and private, visibility and invisibility, inclusion and exclusion.

In this context, practices such as tactical frivolity (Vila and Expósito, 2007) emerge as performative and creative forms of protest strategy that combine play, irony, theater, and festivity to subvert power dynamics in public space. Originating in the anti-globalization movements of the 1990s, these practices seek to break the tension and conflictuality typical of traditional demonstration, transforming protest into a space of collective expression, irony, and resistance (Evans, 2003). Rooted in queer and anti-capitalist movements, tactical frivolity deploys theatrical excess to destabilize hegemonic codes of urban politics, particularly those govern-

ing decorum and the legitimacy of exclusive public space. This approach finds emblematic expression in the actions enacted by *Reclaim the Streets* (RTS), a British movement founded in 1991 that occupied urban space, transforming streets into places of collective festivity and performance, using music, costumes, and irony to contest neoliberalism and the commodification of public space. Through these practices, RTS demonstrated how the aesthetic and affective dimension can function as a tool to create alternative political spaces and challenge urban norms. By weaponizing aesthetic disorder and absurdity, RTS shows how the affective and sensory dimensions of protest could subvert dominant spatial norms and open space for alternative political imaginaries. These ephemeral, relational interventions momentarily dissolve the rigid boundaries imposed on urban life, creating openings where conventional perceptions of public space might be renegotiated. As Rachele Borghi affirms (2014), such acts mobilize «de-generate, fabulous, militant bodies» to performatively disrupt and re-signify public space. This legacy continues in movements like post-porn (Bourcier, 2001) and SlutWalk – which exemplify this queer tradition of spatial reappropriation (Borghi, 2014) – where bodies marked as transgressive reclaim their presence in urban space through joyous insurgency. At its core, tactical frivolity reconstitutes dissent as an aesthetic and ritual practice – one that doesn't simply protest injustice, but actively rewires how urban space can be inhabited.

The performative practices discussed renew the right to the city through affective and performative forms of resistance. They show that the body is a political platform: visibility and vulnerability constitute a performative political act (Butler, 2017), aesthetic disorder becomes a political strategy, and the very concept of decorum is unsettled and redefined. Spatiality emerges as a field of conflict, where dissenting bodies act as a vector of fracture, inscribing micro-geographies of resistance, reappropriation, and political presence within urban space. Through embodied action, these practices forge alternative modes of inhabiting the city, where bodies, identities, and political practices intertwine in collective action. Historically marginalized subjectivities become visible through acts of insurgency that disrupt the heteronormative and cisnormative norms governing urbanity. In this sense, performativity becomes a space of transfeminist and intersectional resistance: the body is reclaimed as political territory, and public space is transformed into a site of struggle,

visibility and legitimacy. Ultimately, such practices create temporary yet potent spaces where the right to the city is not only asserted but embodied, as an affective reconfiguration of the urban that makes visible struggles against gender-based violence, sexism, and multiple discriminations.

Concluding reflections

Drawing on Butler's (2021) formulation of the differential distribution of vulnerability and Lefebvre's (2014) theorization of the right to the city, this paper has explored how social struggles are co-constituted under capitalist spatial regimes. By highlighting the systematic material, symbolic and representational exclusions that shapes public spaces, we have shown how marginalization operates not through isolated axes of oppression but as an entangled system of territorialized exclusion (Sandercock, 2004; Muxì Martinez, 2011; Kern, 2020). This intersectional landscape of marginalization is spatially enacted in urban environments, where bodily and territorial exclusions mutually reinforce one another under neoliberal governance. Against this backdrop, embodied, collective, and systemic resistance becomes not only necessary but urgent. Bodies are not only spatially situated, intricately connected to the environments they inhabit and the spaces they traverse, but they are also «political places, through which the relationship between subjects and contexts and the political con-division of the world is given» (Castelli, 2019, p. 41). The corporeal dimension thus becomes a vital hinge between politics, space, and human action: a means through which space can be shared, transformed, and cared for. The right to the city, then, must be understood not merely as a demand for access or visibility, but as a radical project of reappropriation and transformation.

The diverse practices explored in this paper demonstrate that resistance is not only oppositional but fundamentally generative (hooks, 2014). They generate counter-spaces for co-presence, material and symbolic reappropriation, genealogical recovery, and shared imagination. Taken together, these experiences reveal a coherent political grammar of feminist counter-spatiality. Whether anchored in body-centered reflection, symbolic re-signification, or performative dissent in public space, this grammar transforms the textures of local life into a site of both re-

sistance and creation, articulating dissent through aesthetic and affective means. Through embodied and symbolic actions, these experiences build what we might call infrastructures of care: networks for support, solidarity, and mutual recognition that challenge atomization and segregation. Rooted in local and situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), these infrastructures do more than fill the voids left by public institutions: they reconfigure urban belonging from the margins, reclaiming the right for all to co-define the terms of collective spatial existence. Urban space, then, emerges as both a site of domination and a terrain of possibility (Agier, 2015): a space where exclusion is enacted, but also where alternative ways of being, resisting, and imagining can unfold.

The city becomes a medium through which new political subjectivities and spatial imaginaries are forged. In this view, «architectural and environmental infrastructures should centre on practices of sharing. Reorganising space can promote a logic of collectivisation over atomisation, thereby enhancing the wellbeing of the environments we inhabit» (The Care Collective 2021, p. 61). In this spirit, we reaffirm Federici's calls for a «collective organisation of reproduction» (Piccardi, 2018, p. 56) as a crucial horizon for contemporary resistance. Against state withdrawal, systemic precarity, and the erosion of public care, such collective infrastructures reframe social reproduction as a transformative practice. To begin from reproduction is to begin from life itself – from desires, everyday needs, and the spaces our bodies inhabit. It invites us to embrace a multidimensional responsibility and reciprocity, and to recognize the eco-political and affective interdependence that binds us to each other and to the Earth.

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When homelessness is female: insights from the Bologna context
Manuela Maggio and Maria Felicia Polimeni[1]

No home(s): the heterogeneity of homelessness

Homelessness constitutes «one of the most extreme forms of poverty and deprivation» (European Commission, 2010) and must be analyzed through a multidisciplinary lens without oversimplified or misleading assumptions. Commonly, the homeless person is still associated with the figure of the *clochard*, a man with alcohol or substance addiction who lives on the street by choice (Pellegrino, 2011; ISTAT, 2014). Otherwise, people experiencing homelessness due to substance use or health issues represent «only a small portion of the broader homeless population»(European Commission, 2025). Homelessness is an increasingly complex and multidimensional phenomenon (Consoli and Meo, 2020), resulting from a combination of individual, economic, and social factors and manifested in a variety of precarious housing situations (Pleace, 2016): some scholars have referred to this complexity as the «second homelessness» (Barnao, 2016; Bianciardi, 2019; Braga, 2015). The European Observatory on Homelessness attempted to systematically define homelessness in its heterogeneous manifestations through the ETHOS typology (FEANTSA, 2005). It identifies three key domains of housing (physical, legal, and social), the absence or partial presence of which determines different forms of homelessness: rooflessness, homelessness, insecure housing, and inadequate housing. This typology has expanded the perspective on the causes and pathways of housing exclusion, enabling the collection of

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comparable data across Europe (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2015).

According to the 2024 «Ninth Overview of Housing Exclusion in Europe», at least 1,287,000 people are homeless across Europe, up from 895,000 the previous year (FEANTSA and Fondation Abbé Pierre, 2024). A similar trend is observable in Italy: 47,648 homeless people were recorded in the first national survey in 2011 (ISTAT, 2012), 50,724 in 2014 (ISTAT, 2015), and 96,197 in the 2021 Permanent Census of Population and Housing[2] (ISTAT, 2022). National surveys further reveal that the majority of homeless individuals are men, often foreign-born, under the age of 54, with low levels of education, primarily concentrated in northern Italy and urban areas. This demographic profile has long shaped both the design of services and the research on severe adult marginalization (Pleace, 2016; Bretherton, 2017). However, recent years have witnessed a shift in this profile, with a notable increase in homeless women observed in various European and non-European cities (Busch- Geertsema *et al.*, 2014; Calvo *et al.*, 2018; Prandini and Ganugi 2021; Sales and Guijarro, 2017; Tutty *et al.*, 2009): in Italy, women represented 14% of the homeless population in 2014 (ISTAT, 2015), rising to 32% by 2021 (ISTAT, 2022). Despite this trend, female homelessness remains under-researched and under-addressed[3]. Similarly, data on women experiencing homelessness remain scarce (Sales and Guijarro, 2017), partly due to prevailing definitions of homelessness and data collection techniques (Bretherton and Mayock, 2021).

Adopting a gender perspective is essential, not only because of the increasing presence of women among the homeless population but also because homelessness must be understood as a gendered experience (Bretherton, 2017; Bullen, 2023; Caramelli *et al.*, 2021; Sev'er, 2002): the factors that lead women into homelessness often differ from those affecting men, as do the coping mechanisms and life trajectories they fol-

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2. However, the cases considered are minimal compared to the wide range of conditions that fall under the phenomenon of homelessness, as the field of observation consists only of homeless people who have no permanent residence and homeless people who have no residence at all, registered with the registry office at a fictitious address or a real address belonging to an *association* (ISTAT, 2022). All homeless people not registered with the registry office and all people living in extremely precarious housing conditions are not included in any census in Italy today.

3. For instance, a Canadian study found that out of 4,102 academic articles on homelessness, only 13 focused on women or offered a gendered analysis (Andermann *et al.*, 2021).

low. This is a challenge to the dominant, male-centered paradigm (O'Sullivan, 2008).

Traits of female homelessness

The definitions applied to homelessness significantly influence how it is measured. Most counts today focus only on its most visible forms, such as people living on the streets, in shelters, or in night accommodation facilities – contexts that are predominantly male[4] (Johnson *et al.*, 2017; Kuziner, 2023). Some European experiences have demonstrated that street counts, when adapted to the specificities of female homelessness, can also capture women living in the most extreme conditions (Wright *et al.*, 2024). The international literature broadly agrees that women are far more likely to experience «hidden homelessness» (Baptista, 2010), a term that encapsulates the social, cultural, and political invisibility of women without stable housing. This condition varies across contexts (Wardhaugh, 2012) and includes a range of informal and precarious housing arrangements (Pleace, 2019), such as staying with friends or relatives, in hotels, in overcrowded apartments without a rental contract, or in subletting situations with no legal protections (Sales and Guijarro, 2017). Generally, women delay turning to traditional homeless services longer than men, often after a period spent in hidden homelessness (Bretherton and Pleace, 2018; Mayock and Sheridan, 2012). They also interact less consistently with services, alternating between visible and hidden forms of homelessness (Box *et al.* 2022; Mayock *et al.*, 2015). Women tend to avoid or use services discontinuously due to past negative, sometimes traumatic, experiences in shelters, often reporting oppressive routines, lack of privacy and autonomy, and infantilizing processes (Rakus and Singleton-Jackson, 2024; Reeve *et al.*, 2006). Feelings of stress, precariousness, and mistrust in a system that seems ineffective often lead them to exit these services. Once outside, they resort to precarious housing solutions or end up living on the streets (Menih, 2020; Schmidt, 2025),

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4. However, some European experiences have shown that street counting, when adapted to the specific circumstances of women's lives, can be a valuable tool for identifying even women living in the most extreme conditions of homelessness (Wright, 2024).

often returning to the system later. This cycle is described as the «revolving door of homelessness» (Vazquez *et al.*, 2019).

Housing instability has significant health risks. Homeless women often suffer from anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Calvo-Garcìa *et al.*, 2016; Reeve *et al.*, 2006; Vazquez and Panadero, 2018) and stressful life events (Rodriguez-Moreno *et al.*, 2021). They also have a higher risk of premature death and more severe substance abuse issues compared to men (Gonzalez-Arribas *et al.* 2024; Montgomery *et al.*, 2017). Compared to the general population, homeless individuals are at a much higher risk of violence (Biro and Turanovic, 2024), with gender being the primary factor among this group (Calvo *et al.*, 2022). Domestic violence is a leading cause of female homelessness (Bretherton, 2017; Sahlin, 2004; Scott and McManus, 2016; Tutty *et al.*, 2013) and a predictor of housing instability (Baker *et al.*, 2010). The ETHOS classification partially incorporates gender-based violence: women experiencing domestic violence are considered in «insecure housing», and those housed in shelters due to such violence are considered «houseless» (FEANTSA, 2005). Despite the established link between female homelessness and gender-based violence, services often address them separately, reinforcing the false dichotomy that domestic violence is a women's issue and adult marginalization is a men's one[5] (Savage, 2016). Anti-violence services themselves have limitations: shelters and support services are often unequipped to assist women facing both violence and mental health or addiction issues (Mayock *et al.*, 2015; FEANTSA, 2019). As a result, women with complex needs are excluded from specialized support (Fiorillo, 2024) and must rely on general homelessness services, which often lack the resources and sensitivity to address their experiences of violence[6] (Mayock *et al.*, 2016).

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5. Emblematic is the exclusion of shelters for women victims of violence from the latest count of homeless people carried out in several European cities; these include Catania and Milan, the two Italian cities included in the survey carried out in October 2024 (European Commission, 2025).

6. In Italy, services for severely marginalized adults are mainly aimed at people living in extreme poverty, homelessness, or severe social marginalization. These services, provided by public and private entities (often in collaboration), respond to basic needs and aim to promote social reintegration.

Research questions and methodology

This contribution aims to address three exploratory research questions to expand the qualitative knowledge available on the phenomenon of homeless women in Italian urban contexts:

1. How does female homelessness manifest in light of the percentage increase recorded at the national level?
2. What relationship emerges between the experience of homelessness and gender-based violence?
3. Are there any initiatives specifically designed to mitigate female homelessness?

Based on a qualitative research approach, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with workers within the GEA network[7] (Grave Emarginazione Adulta - Severe Adult Marginalization) in the city of Bologna. Bologna is the capital of Emilia-Romagna, an Italian region with one of the highest mortality rates among the homeless Italian population (Fio.PSD, 2024). The decision to interview workers was justified both by the need to situate female homelessness within the broader evolution of homelessness – a perspective made possible through the support of privileged witnesses working in the sector – and by the lack of local studies that could inform a medium- or long-term interpretation of the phenomenon

The first goal of the research was thus to investigate the configuration of female homelessness in Bologna: its manifestations, distinguishing features, and underlying dynamics. The second goal, closely linked to the first, was to analyze the relationship between the experience of being a woman without stable housing and gender-based violence. Finally, the research focused on the approach and projects implemented by the GEA network to address gender-based violence among homeless women, highlighting key challenges and future development opportunities.

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7. In Bologna, the Grave Emarginazione Adulta network is an integrated system of services and resources that assists people experiencing marginalization and homelessness. This network includes various entities, including institutional and non-profit organizations. The goal is to provide hospitality, support, and social inclusion for vulnerable people.

«A world we had never seen»: new faces of female homelessness

According to 2023 data from ASP Città di Bologna, over 650 women in a condition of severe marginalization were present in the city, representing approximately 15% of the total homeless population recorded by local services. Among these, 458 were reached on the street, 111 attended community-based workshops, and 211 were housed in facilities[8].

Data from the GEA network's «Fuori Binario» service, which supports homeless individuals with problematic substance use, shows that the most significant increases affect the female component of homeless people. One operator noted: «The numbers of homeless women have always been very low"[9], but in recent years, "these numbers are increasing across all age groups». Italy, characterized by a strong familial welfare system typical of Mediterranean countries, may have probably historically delayed and later obscured the issue of female homelessness. The GEA professionals interviewed highlighted a general trend of impoverishment, which affects different population groups in various ways (for example, non-native people):

> While men are increasing mainly among non-native groups, women are the only group growing significantly among Italian nationals and people from Eastern Europe. However, the majority are Italian, which is unusual because, in recent years, all the increases we have seen have typically been among non-native populations.[...]

Operators reported that there is no single profile of the homeless woman, as the situations are highly varied. The women who turn to services differ in age, education, origin, and life history. These seem to be new dynamics impacting «previously protected or invisible groups», which can be traced back to several factors:

a. processes of impoverishment and wealth polarization, leading to the erosion of the middle class and pushing previously unaffected pop-

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8. https://www.bolognatoday.it/cronaca/donne-senza-fissa-dimora.html. Last access, 06.2025.

9. All text in quotation marks refers to excerpts from interviews and therefore corresponds to the interviewees' own words. These excerpts appear either integrated within the text or set apart as separate quotations

ulations into absolute poverty, «what we now see on the streets is a world we had never seen before»;

b.   weakening of the protective role played by the family within the Italian welfare system, resulting in more individuals being «expelled» and reaching out to social services;

c.   growing awareness of gender-based violence and female empowerment: «Today, it is easier to choose not to stay in an oppressive or violent family; better to live on the street».

Unlike men, who are more visibly homeless, women often go through a hidden phase of housing insecurity, marked by efforts to find alternatives before resorting to the streets:

> Women, before ending up in a shelter, try everything. [...] I find a trailer, I stay with friends, I go to the nuns, I move around, I try domestic work. I try everything. When I have had enough beatings and do not know what else to do, I turn to social services. There is a big trust issue, simply because our services are built for a male, outdoor clientele already in chronic condition.

Consider revising this sentence. The women who end up living on the streets appear to experience a deeper degree of personal and social marginalization – one of the few common elements within the otherwise varied world of female homelessness. As one interviewee observed:

> They have much bigger problems than men. Once they end up on the streets, it means that their lives are worse than those of men who end up on the streets. Although they are few, some men make the choice of the street. I have never seen this among women. [...] When a woman arrives on the streets, she has already gone through all the stages of severe adult marginalization.

In general, while society and services pay more attention to and protect women, on the other hand:

> One thing they all have in common is that they have a terrible relationship with services. Women tend to come out of terrible experiences with services when they arrive here, and you have to rebuild a relation-

ship of trust that has not existed for years. Having a protective cultural approach does not necessarily mean it has created a protective welfare system for women. It is partly discriminatory because when models of femininity emerge that are not liked, the services find it more difficult to work with them. In my opinion, this is one of the reasons why women are considered "wild," i.e., you talk to other colleagues about severe adult marginalization, and they tell you that women who end up on the streets are wilder than men. And I am very convinced that this is not said about men because we are used to seeing men as brutalized while thinking that a woman can also become brutalized on the streets is something strange.

The problematic relationship with welfare services is partly linked to another characteristic of female homelessness, namely that

> Among women, consumption is almost always more excessive than among men. That is, some men consume little, and men consume a lot, but on average, consumption tends to be alcohol or other substances. At the same time, women are all poly-substance users; that is, they use everything and use everything in large quantities.

These elements allow us to identify typically female characteristics in the phenomenon of homelessness. These observations make it possible to identify certain features that can be typically associated with female homelessness (in the Bologna context). First, they point to a profound breakdown of social ties, which extends beyond personal relationships to include a broader rupture of trust in the welfare system and in the services responsible for protecting vulnerable individuals. The frequent presence of poly-substance use and excessive consumption reflects lives marked by deep fragmentation. At the same time, these practices can also be read as acts of resistance – a form of rebellion against stereotypical and stigmatizing representations of women – whereby living on the streets and choosing to use substances, even in large quantities, may represent an attempt to reclaim one's female identity.

To cope with life on the streets, women implement specific survival strategies. These strategies, intertwined with gender dynamics, can vary from woman to woman. Still, it is possible to identify two main mechanisms, which are not mutually exclusive but can alternate or coexist throughout the life of a homeless woman: on the one hand, some women

defend themselves from the dangers of the street and assert their agency in a context of marginalization adopting behaviors and attitudes typical of the male gender; on the other hand, some women may accentuate their femininity, using their appearance and their body as a tool for survival. This strategy usually includes resorting to sex work for exchange, in which women form relationships with men who are also homeless: «These are two typical tools, produced by gender oppression, which become two interchangeable and necessary alternatives for survival on the streets». Both strategies expose women to significant risks. In fact, «both the dynamic in which I have a relationship with you to get something, which can be a casual relationship and therefore also a sexual service, but also a longer-term relationship; and the other case in which I act like a "tomboy" and therefore have to be more violent than you, overexpose women greater risks than men». At the same time, homeless people experience all the discrimination and social oppression that comes with being «at the bottom of society», women face an additional element: gender discrimination. It is present at all levels and in all areas of society, but for homeless women

> Discrimination and oppression are at their highest, particularly the risk of being beaten, of being killed [...]. Women on the streets are much more visible because there are few of them; men notice them immediately and pounce on them. Pack dynamics also exist on the streets, so women are always overexposed.

Homeless people can become targets of socially integrated individuals, as their marginalized status, often perceived as «disturbing» or «threatening», exposes them to greater risks of physical, verbal, and psychological aggression. Acts of vandalism, theft, and damage to their personal belongings and the places where they find shelter are unfortunately frequent and «A woman is at greater risk in this because a socially integrated person could get away with sexually assaulting a homeless woman who has fewer means of defending herself».

Another particularly significant element that emerged from the interviews conducted is the pervasiveness of gender-based violence among women experiencing social and housing marginalization. The testimonies collected paint a picture in which violence is not an isolated or sporadic event but rather an experience shared by many women, regardless of their

age, origin, or personal history. So much so that one interviewee states that «every woman we meet has experienced some form of violence and also experiences it within the services». There is a significant background of domestic violence perpetrated by partners, but sometimes also by parents or children. The operators report that many women say they have witnessed violence since childhood and, in several cases, the violence suffered at home is the reason why the woman became homeless: «I think of a woman who left her family because of a very oppressive situation and preferred to live on the streets», or «We have a guest who ran away from another city, where she used to live, and came here because her husband was abusive».

Violence is described as pervasive towards these women and varies in its manifestations (physical assault, verbal and psychological violence, sexual harassment and violence, economic exploitation, coercive control, stalking). The very decision to access a local shelter is often influenced by violence: «One girl did not go in because her abuser was around; when he wasn't there because he was staying at another service, she was able to go in; but that evening, she agreed to go in because she had almost been gang-raped in the square».

To understand the pervasiveness of violence in the lives of homeless women, it is essential to note that «women, especially those aged 14/28[10], bring back at least one new story of rape every time they return».

Finally, the service workers involved highlighted a widespread tendency to normalize violence. This can be defined as a process through which traumatic and violent experiences are internalized and considered an integral part of one's existence. It is a complex phenomenon in which an important role is certainly played by the sexist and patriarchal culture still present in our society, which normalizes and justifies violence against women, perpetuating gender stereotypes and power asymmetries. The women interviewed emphasized that many women do not recognize or minimize the violence they have suffered, considering it «normal» or «inevitable» in their marginalized condition. This mechanism can be a survival strategy in the context of extreme vulnerability. Still, it prevents women from recognizing the seriousness of the violence they

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10. With this term, the operator refers to the reception arrangements at the dormitory. People are admitted to the dormitory for 14 consecutive days, which can be repeated after a 28-day interval.

have suffered and from seeking help. The transition from unawareness to awareness, «which is the biggest and most difficult task», is, in fact, the first fundamental step in breaking the cycle of violence and embarking on a path of recovery and empowerment for women. While the forms of violence are very similar to those suffered by women with a home, the violence suffered by homeless women takes on specific characteristics linked to their particular social, economic, and marginalized housing conditions. The first distinctive element concerns the perpetrator of violence. While women with homes suffer violence mainly from partners, family members, or acquaintances[11], for homeless women, violence is often perpetrated also by strangers. The streets, public places, and marginalized contexts become scenes of assault, harassment, and abuse by individuals who exploit women's vulnerability and isolation. Another specific feature is linked to the high level of blackmail ability experienced by homeless women. Economic dependence, precarious housing, and lack of support networks can force women to stay with their abusers rather than end up on the streets because, in other words, «it is better to have the protection of one man or to accept violence from one man than from four men in one night if you are outside». In addition, substance dependence is a significant vulnerability factor, as the abuser is often the person from whom women purchase the substance or who, in some cases, facilitates its use. This dynamic, therefore, creates a bond of dependence that makes it even more difficult for women to escape violence.

Another aspect that characterizes the experience of homeless women is the violence they experience within services dealing with severe adult marginalization, particularly in dormitories. Dormitories and other facilities in the service network, designed and built to meet the needs of male users, can become places where women suffer further forms of violence. Promiscuity, lack of safe spaces, and little attention to gender dynamics can encourage harassment, assault, and discrimination. This issue highlights a significant gap in the system for combating gender-based violence, already noted in the literature and strongly emerging from the interviews conducted: the absence of an approach specifically designed for homeless women. Anti-violence centers (CAV), which play a fundamental role in supporting women who experience violence, are unable,

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11. https://www.istat.it/it/files/2015/06/Violenze_contro_le_donne.pdf Last access, 06.2025.

however, to adequately address the needs of homeless women, who are often invisible and «unsuitable» for traditional support services: «A woman on the street cannot go to the CAV. Anti-violence centers are designed for socially integrated women, and women on the street who go to the CAV are tough to manage».

In addition, shelters have restrictive access criteria that exclude women with substance abuse or mental health problems.,In the Bologna area has taken action by local services to respond to this emerging need:

> In the fall of 2020, three meetings were organized in anticipation of the organization of the Cold Weather Plan. [...] During one of these meetings, we raised the issue of violence against homeless women and said that nothing specific was being done. From there, everything that we now call the GEA anti-violence system and reception services began. There was a convergence between the Public Administration and the different local managing bodies; we realized that something was wrong, and we attempted to address this challenge. At that point, we discovered that there was no literature, no methodology, and we began to look at all the women who do not have access to the ordinary anti-violence system.

In 2021, therefore, an initial trial began involving various organizations in the area with the pilot projects «Out of shade»[12] and «Shelt(h) er», dealing with gender-based violence among homeless women. Over the years, the project underwent several name changes, ultimately settling on its current name, «Step Forward». In 2024, 27 homeless women contacted the CAV for an initial interview; of these, six began an anti-violence program, which was two more than in the previous year.[13] With the co-design of 2025, new reports have already been received and cases are underway. As one professional noted, integrating responses to gender-based violence into services for severely marginalized adults represents «a major shift, a real change of direction in the approach, thinking, and planning of services». This project has enabled operators to identify

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12. https://www.mondodonna-onlus.it/out-of-shade-servizi-antiviolenza-per-donne-a-rischio-di- emarginazione/#:~:text=servizi%20territoriali%20aderenti.-
,OUT%20OF%20SHADE%20mira%20a%20sostenere%20le%20donne%20senza%20dimora,di%20sostegno%20e%20 di%20supporto. Last access, 06.2025.
13. mondodonna-onlus.it/wp/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/CHIAMA-CHIAMA-REPORT-202324.pdf Last access, 06.2025.

and highlight additional critical policy issues. The first crucial aspect concerns the lack of attractive tools that can, on the one hand, facilitate the interception of homeless women and, on the other, address the issue of gender-based violence: «We need to become more attractive to women in general, and this also means reworking the basic tools. Until now, we have worked with male homeless people; now, we need to work on a different image and, therefore, change the basic tools of all services». For this reason, according to the operators, spaces for women only are needed (such as the Spazio Donne[14] workshop run by the Fuori Binario service): «in my opinion, what is needed are more separatist spaces, i.e., broad separatism, obviously not transphobic. We also need spaces for women that are on the streets using substances». It is emphasized that in Italy, there are still no adequate harm reduction facilities and that «having consumption rooms would be important to reach many homeless women. [...]». Adequate spaces, particularly separate consumption rooms, are considered both a protective and a potential tool for engagement. However, potential pitfalls in a possible future implementation cannot be ruled out, both in terms of exclusively gender-oriented services and in terms of potential gender- based discrimination against transgender people. For this reason, a challenge that emerges strongly is the need to work with homeless, violent men. Within this context of severe marginalization, it is noted that

> Men have neither the individual resources to overcome their abusive behavior nor the network to offer services to help them do so. [...] We feel powerless because it would be important, also for the protection of the women staying in the facilities, to be able to intervene with the men because feeling safe also depends on who the other guests are.

From the point of view of the CAVs, there is also a need to expand the range of engaging initiatives offered to women:

> a nice pre-opening snack where they can stay inside the facility for two hours beforehand. A nice day where they take care of ourselves, where we

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14. Spazio Donne is a weekly workshop held in a space reserved for women and gender non-conforming individuals who use the service, creating a safe environment where they can relax and express themselves, enjoying moments of leisure and self-care. The welcoming space and intimate atmosphere created during the workshop encourage dialogue between participants, facilitating interpersonal relationships in a context different from the street.

can get our hair done, where we can take a moment for ourselves. These things would be beneficial, even things that seem silly. I think there is something very violent that is often ignored in homelessness: all those everyday things that make life beautiful.

Building on this idea, one interviewee emphasized that

the way we take care of homeless people needs to be rethought. For example, offering psychological assistance, which is something that the health service cannot provide, or a place, a day workshop just for women; places and services enable people to build relationships of trust, [...] which are necessary to create one attractive and safe setting.

In addition, a particularly problematic aspect that has been identified concerns the reception offered when a woman experiences violence. As already highlighted, the shelters in the anti-violence system do not have the tools to accommodate women with mental health problems or substance addiction, issues that affect many homeless women. This limitation, as one operator observed, means that,

if you are a person who uses drugs, who has some psychiatric problems, and who is beaten by your partner, you will not find a place in the reception services; you will find places that are those of severe adult marginalization, which are not protected places. This is the real problem: the lack of places and resources for people with psychiatric problems or pathological substance addiction. [...] There are very few real resources.

The resource that workers strongly advocate for is the implementation of shelters dedicated exclusively to women.

Such a shelter is a fundamental protective tool, which allows women to be removed from their abusers promptly, preventing further episodes of violence; it offers a safe and secure environment where women can feel welcome without fear of further violence or discrimination; it initiates a personalized support program for the multiple and layered needs of women.

The Bologna case reveals how female homelessness cannot be understood merely through the lens of social exclusion, but rather as the outcome of intersecting processes of marginalization, gendered expectations,

and institutional blind spots. The accounts gathered from workers highlight a persistent mismatch between women's lived experiences and the frameworks through which services interpret and address homelessness. At the same time, they show how women's trajectories – marked by both fragmentation and acts of resistance – challenge conventional categories of vulnerability and care. What emerges is a complex, often contradictory picture in which survival, agency, and marginalization coexist, revealing the gendered dimensions of life on the streets and the limits of current service paradigms. The practical implementation of the tools and services described above requires a strong commitment in terms of human, financial, and structural resources. Such investment is not neutral but reflects specific policy choices that define how services are designed and organized, as well as the role they are to play in society. It is also essential that policy choices are consistent with the real needs and wishes of homeless women and with the objectives of combating gender-based violence. One of the biggest obstacles is the difficulty institutions and services have in fully understanding what it means to be a woman living on the streets.

Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the specific nature of female homelessness, linking it to the structural and cultural limitations of services designed to combat severe adult marginalization and gender-based violence. Through the analysis of qualitative data collected in Bologna, the biggest city of one of the Italian regions with the highest mortality rates among homeless people, it has been possible to highlight the growing presence of homeless women, often Italian and previously socially integrated, and the strong interconnection between gender-based violence and pathways to housing exclusion, as well as elements that currently characterize the female component of homelessness in the area.

The research showed that women tend to experience less visible forms of homelessness than men, relying on precarious, temporary, and often dangerous housing solutions before accessing services. This invisibility produces a double disadvantage: on the one hand, it hinders early detection and intervention; on the other, it fuels the idea that homelessness is a predominantly male phenomenon, influencing the organization of

services. The normalization of violence within the female trajectory of homelessness has also emerged. The operators interviewed report stories of women who have experienced multiple forms of violence, often beginning in the family but continuing on the streets and sometimes within the services themselves. This pervasiveness of violence, combined with a lack of safe places and mistrust of services, leads to contradictory and risky survival strategies that increase the marginalization and vulnerability of women.

The experience of the GEA network's "Step Forward" project, although still experimental, represents a significant case of innovation in services. The coordination between anti-violence operators and services for severe marginalization, the focus on building protected relational settings, and the reflection on the adequacy of existing tools are elements that depart from a traditional approach, which is fragmented and gender-neutral fragmented and gender-neutral (in line with the latest guidelines, see for example the recent policies review of Galán-Sanantonio and colleagues (2025)). However, numerous critical issues remain: the lack of resources, the need to rethink the attractiveness of services, the urgent need to develop interventions for abusive men, and the absence of truly inclusive facilities for people with complex needs or non-conforming gender identities. In conclusion, addressing female homelessness requires both systemic and cultural change, a perspective already evident among female workers who recognize that, even in the Italian context, homeless people are not passive victims of fate (Porcellana, 2018) but *désaffiliée* subjects (Castel, 1994; 2019). Women, in particular, face compounded vulnerability: intersecting structural disadvantages heighten the risk of re-victimization and illustrate the gendered dimensions of life on the streets (Broll and Huey 2020; Craig and Hastings 2024; Crenshaw, 2015; Domandzic and Pascual 2020; Earle-Brown 2022; Hanley *et al.* 2019). Translating these insights into practice demands a strong commitment of human, financial, and structural resources. Such investment is never neutral: it embodies specific policy choices that shape the design and organization of services, as well as their social role. Crucially, these choices must align with the lived realities, needs, and aspirations of homeless women while supporting broader objectives such as combating gender-based violence. A persistent challenge, however, lies in the difficulty institutions and services face in fully understanding what it means to be a woman living on

the streets – a gap that underlines the importance of integrating experience-based knowledge into both service design and policy planning.

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Body, market, self-determination. The relationality necessary to overcome neoliberal individualism
Giada Cascio[1]

Introduction

A conversation on surrogacy cannot exclude an adequate examination of the gendered context and the unique power dynamics inherent in pregnancy and reproduction. A surrogate-centred approach, by contrast, has the potential to yield different insights and outcomes. This perspective typically emphasises the agency of individuals who choose to act as surrogates. Scholars have frequently drawn comparisons between the decision to become a surrogate and the decision to engage in sex work, highlighting shared critiques related to the commodification of one's body and the lack of recognition as legitimate labour in both contexts. While this paper aligns with the view that gestational surrogacy should be regarded as gestational and reproductive labour to better protect the rights, interests, and agency of surrogates, framing surrogacy solely as gestational labour may be insufficient for these purposes. The framework of reproductive justice highlights that when reproductive labour operates within systems of systemic discrimination and reinforces oppressive structures, it may, at best, ensure minimal protections for surrogates without challenging the underlying inequities. Hence, this paper does not seek to endorse the liberal valorisation of the decision to engage in reproductive labour, which tends to erase the biological contribution of the gestation to ease the detachment between the surrogate and the child, ultimately to be entrusted to the intended parents. Instead, it advocates

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for the framing of gestational labour as a form of waged reproductive labour within a system that prioritises the emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being of gestational surrogates. Such a framework seeks to acknowledge and value their contributions to the gestational process rather than erasing or treating them as secondary. These considerations will be further examined within the context of the international reproductive market, following an analysis of its defining characteristics and broader impacts. This approach facilitates a critical reassessment of the current debate on artificial reproduction, which often remains confined to a binary focus on legitimacy versus illegitimacy.

In all domains of bioethics, questions surrounding assisted reproduction arise from the potential inherent in emerging technologies. Reproductive technologies operate within a complex philosophical and social framework, particularly concerning concepts of procreation and motherhood. Indeed, these technologies formalise a division between the various contributions to procreation, thereby challenging conventional legal, social, and, to some extent, natural perceptions of procreation. Beyond the effects that those technologies may entail for family structures, where assisted reproductive technologies redefine traditional parental roles, the impact of technological advancements on legal systems and society as a whole is multifaceted. These advancements often outpace existing legal frameworks, which struggle to adapt while balancing competing interests and broader ethical and social concerns. In recent years, legal systems have begun to question the suitability of existing laws and interpretive frameworks within the field of bio-law, which involves the theoretical examination of emerging bioethical issues from a legal, philosophical perspective. This newfound interest stems from significant societal transformations that have impacted both individuals and communities, coinciding with the rise of an ethically pluralistic society. However, the relationship between bioethics and law remains a subject of inquiry, particularly regarding the necessity and nature of regulatory intervention in bioethical matters. Should regulations align with specific moral values, or should they strive to strike a balance between competing interests, refraining from imposing particular moral stances? Within this analysis of the bioethics-law relationship, the latter approach (which prioritises individual autonomy) emerges as prominent despite legal systems often leaning towards the former due to the political complexities surround-

ing bioethical issues. The tension between science, ethics, and law is apparent in matters of human procreation. Understanding technological and scientific change in this field means, for lawmakers, trying to accompany it to prevent the emergence of social problems and to reduce social costs and conflicts that innovation often brings. For lawmakers, adjusting to societal changes requires not only responding to individual transformations but also understanding broader shifts, particularly those driven by technological advancements. These changes, once internalized by the collective, profoundly impact both emotional and psychological structures, as well as the individuals themselves. The internalization of these shifts – on both individual and collective levels – further deepens the gap between technological progress and the pace of legal regulation. Consequently, this creates a widening disconnect between a reality that is constantly evolving and the ability of the law to address and regulate assisted reproduction promptly. If legal systems had first faced the need to adapt to the separation between sexuality and reproduction – for example, through the reforms on abortion and contraception[2]. Those changes represented the base on which States could address the separation between conception and reproduction brought by reproductive technologies (Rodotà, 1992, p. 5.) Nonetheless, this step has proved to be an even harder one since the law was – and is – now facing the advent of technologies such as in vitro fertilisation, which implies the separation between biological fecundation and childbirth. Reproduction becomes physically separated from the biology of the body (of the mother) itself, turning into something extracorporeal and challenging the "naturality" of the reproductive process. Gestational surrogacy further pushes the boundary of "natural" reproduction. Through reproductive technologies it «challenges women to be mothers even if without uterus (*etsi uterus non daretur*), independently and beyond the material given of gestation and childbirth just as for men, for a long time, fatherhood has been allowed even if semen is not provided (*etsi semen non daretur*)» (Santosuosso, 2005, p.

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2. For example, in Italy, both of those areas have seen the peak of public interest and social changes in the period leading to the reforms of the 1970s. On the 10th of March 1971, the Constitutional Court repealed the article of the penal code criminalising every conduct aiming for the advertisement and propaganda of means to prevent procreation, thus legitimising access to contraception. Later, access to abortion was regulated with the law L. 194 of 1978, "Rules for the social protection of maternity and voluntary termination of pregnancy").

48). The scientific separation between fecundation, gestation, and birth admittedly challenges the concept of nature/natural. To be challenged is the very idea of nature connected to the biological and physical pre-eminence of the mother, according to which what is natural is intrinsically aligned with the law.

Purpose and functioning of ART in surrogacy

According to what has just been outlined, in eras past, the conventional familial structure typically consisted of a singular mother and father, each embodying a unique genetic, biological, and parental relationship with their offspring. However, the advent of assisted reproductive technologies introduces a paradigm shift, precipitating a discernible bifurcation in these traditional roles. It is imperative to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the intricate technologies utilised in surrogacy and assisted reproduction, as they play a pivotal role in deconstructing the traditional phases of procreation, thereby introducing a paradigm shift that detaches it from the physical confines of the "traditional" mother's body. Assisted reproductive technologies (ART) are all the techniques that allow us to establish a pregnancy without a sexual encounter (Lecaldano, 2002). Different types of ART can replace, to a greater or lesser extent, various stages of the reproductive process. We consider assisted reproductive technologies «all treatments or procedures that include the in vitro handling of both human oocytes and sperm, or embryos, for the purpose of establishing a pregnancy», thus including «in vitro fertilisation, embryo transfer, gamete intrafallopian transfer, zygote intrafallopian transfer, tubal embryo transfer, gamete and embryo cryopreservation, oocyte and embryo donation, and gestational surrogacy» (Zegers-Hochschild *et al.*, 2009). Alongside this non-exhaustive list, there are techniques for insemination that have been employed even without medical assistance and through very basic tools (such as a syringe), where the cause of infertility lies in the inability of the sperm to reach the ova, in cases where the male partner is infertile, and even in cases of single women or lesbian intended parents with sperm donors. Surrogacy, as delineated, refers to the practice of gestating a child for another individual or couple, commonly known as the intended parent/s, and may occur either through monetary com-

pensation or altruistic motives. This dichotomy gives rise to two distinct surrogacy arrangements: commercial and altruistic surrogacy. The first involves financial remuneration, while the second is devoid of financial incentives, besides the cost of medical surveillance for the gestational carrier and the fetus, as the intended parent/s usually covers these. Furthermore, a nuanced classification can be elucidated based on the genetic material utilised in the surrogacy procedure. In cases where the surrogate carries an embryo conceived through in vitro fertilisation, utilising the gametes of the intended parents, the procedure is denoted as gestational surrogacy or full surrogacy. Conversely, if the surrogate carries an embryo conceived through the utilisation of her ova and the sperm of the intended parent, the procedure is categorised as traditional surrogacy or partial surrogacy. The recurs to surrogacy arrangements offers an avenue for individuals facing certain medical conditions that render them unable to carry a pregnancy with their uterus. Such conditions may include, but are not limited to, uterine absence hysterectomy, severe congenital uterine anomalies, or medical conditions in the mother that contraindicate pregnancy. One of the most attractive aspects of gestational surrogacy is the fact that it allows for the creation of embryos using genetic material from one or both of the intended parents, even if the intended mother does not physically carry the pregnancy. This method has expanded the scope of parenthood options, extending to homosexual couples and single men who can now achieve biological parenthood using their genetic material.

Free consent as a *condicio sine qua non*

Regardless of the perspective adopted, the gestational surrogate remains a person exercising their bodily and reproductive autonomy, whether the foetus is viewed as part of their body or merely contained within it. Limitations on such autonomy are often defended through an appeal to benevolent paternalism, ostensibly aimed at protecting the welfare of women and children. One common justification for such restrictions is the critique that it is impossible to secure fully informed and voluntary consent from individuals deciding to act as surrogates. In healthcare, patient consent has emerged as a cornerstone of bioethics and liberal philosophy. Yet, it often represents the upper limit of patient au-

tonomy, particularly for women, who are frequently perceived reductively, defined more by their biological capacities than their rational agency. This perspective undermines their recognition as fully autonomous moral agents, perpetuating their historical marginalisation in decisions concerning their own bodies. Traditionally, healthcare ethics prioritised professional obligations or utilitarian considerations over patient autonomy, relegating consent to a secondary role and restricting meaningful participation. Even today, the liberal ideal of moral equality often reduces to a limited focus on patient rights. The ostensibly fundamental right to bodily self-determination offers only limited protection, particularly in contexts like pregnancy, where the boundary between the pregnant individual and the foetus – namely, the boundary between self and other, a cornerstone of dominant ethical frameworks – becomes inherently blurred. In such cases, the application of traditional models of moral autonomy becomes increasingly tenuous and strained, highlighting the need for more nuanced and context-sensitive ethical approaches. Surrogacy is a complex process involving intricate medical procedures, profound ethical considerations, and stringent legal obligations, all of which converge to raise critical issues about the autonomy and informed consent of surrogate mothers. The journey of surrogacy typically begins with a series of invasive IVF-related procedures, progressing through pregnancy and culminating in childbirth, which is often managed via caesarean section to mitigate risks perceived by medical professionals (Simopoulou *et al.*, 2018). Beyond these physical demands, surrogate mothers may face additional expectations, such as residing in designated facilities for monitoring, breastfeeding the baby, or providing temporary care until the commissioning parents are ready to assume responsibility. In some arrangements, commissioning parents are present at the birth and immediately take custody of the newborn. However, ethical dilemmas arise when commissioning parents reject a child born with disabilities[3], leav-

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3. This scenario is not uncommon, as evidenced by reports from Kyiv during the early stages of the Russian war on Ukraine. Surrogate-born children were stranded for weeks at the BioTexCom Centre for Human Reproduction when their intended parents were unable to cross the border due to the conflict. The owner of the company revealed that in at least three instances, intended parents rejected surrogate-born babies because the children were born with health issues. Furthermore, during the company's first year of operation, there were several reported cases of embryo mix-ups during surrogacy procedures, highlighting serious ethical and procedural concerns within the surrogacy industry.

ing the surrogate mother or, in some cases, the state to shoulder the responsibility of raising the child. These scenarios underscore the need for surrogates to make informed and autonomous decisions, which require access to comprehensive, accurate, and comprehensible information about the risks, benefits, and implications of each stage of the process. The information provided must not overwhelm or confuse the surrogate but should instead focus on material details that enable her to understand and evaluate her options fully. Consent in this context is not a one-time event but an ongoing and collaborative process that must adapt to the evolving circumstances of surrogacy, ensuring that the surrogate remains empowered throughout the arrangement. In practice, however, achieving meaningful informed consent is fraught with challenges, particularly in international surrogacy contexts, such as those in India, where ethical and legal safeguards may be insufficient. Research has shown that surrogate mothers in such settings often rely heavily on medical practitioners as their primary source of information (Smith, Hewitt, and Fronek, 2024, p. 268.). These doctors, however, may simultaneously represent the commissioning parents, creating potential conflicts of interest that can compromise the surrogate's autonomy. This issue is not universal, as many permissive statutory regimes – usually in wealthier nations – increasingly mandate safeguards to be put in surrogacy agreements, such as independent legal and medical counselling for all parties involved (Joslin, 2021, p. 443). Nonetheless, it is usually when the arrangements take place in the Global South that surrogates lack adequate information about critical aspects of the process (Tanderup, 2015, p. 469), such as the number of embryos implanted, the risks associated with multiple pregnancies, or the long-term health implications of procedures like caesarean sections. Consequently, the effectiveness of safeguards designed to empower surrogate mothers in their decision-making depends heavily on the local context, particularly the political and economic conditions of the country where the arrangement occurs. The greater the political and economic power of the surrogate, the more likely it is that protections will be in place to safeguard their rights and position. These practices highlight the disparities in power and knowledge that can undermine the surrogate's ability to make autonomous decisions. Autonomy requires more than just the technical capacity to comprehend information; it necessitates a level of understanding that allows the surrogate to align her

choices with her personal values, aspirations, and circumstances. For example, some surrogate mothers may weigh the physical and emotional challenges of surrogacy against the potential financial rewards, envisioning opportunities to invest in their families or improve their living conditions. These decisions are deeply personal and vary widely depending on the individual's priorities and worldview. From an ethical standpoint, valid consent hinges on the principle of voluntariness, which requires that decisions be made free from coercion or manipulation. While influences such as reasoned persuasion by trusted professionals are consistent with ethical consent, coercive practices – where individuals are pressured or threatened into compliance – are fundamentally incompatible with the principle of respect for autonomy. Similarly, manipulation, which involves the intentional distortion of information to guide a decision, undermines the authenticity of consent. For instance, emotional appeals that frame surrogates as performing a noble or divine act while disregarding the practical challenges and risks they face can subtly erode their ability to make genuinely independent choices. This dynamic is one of the reasons why altruistic surrogacy is not necessarily more ethical than commercial surrogacy. Altruistic surrogacy is often portrayed as an act of immense generosity and selflessness – typically expected of women – but this framing may not always align with the best interests of the women acting as surrogates. As an author argues, «the moral distinction between altruistic and commercial surrogacy is not only gendered but also reflects and reinforces power imbalances between intended parents and surrogate mothers, shaped by gender, race, class, and nationality» (Hovav, 2019, p. 274). Furthermore, this dichotomy often primarily benefits the intermediaries involved rather than the surrogates themselves. These ethical concerns are mirrored in the legal framework governing informed consent, which is rooted in the protection of individual autonomy and the prevention of unwarranted interference. Legally, valid consent requires three essential elements: the capacity to understand the nature and implications of the decision, the voluntary nature of the decision-making process, and the specificity of the consent to the proposed medical interventions (Smith, Hewitt, and Fronek, 2024, p. 272). While the law does not mandate the disclosure of every possible risk or complication, it emphasises the need for sufficient information to enable the individual to understand the nature of the physical interference and its broad implica-

tions. The involvement of intermediaries and the transnational nature of many surrogacy arrangements further complicate the process of obtaining informed consent. In some cases, intermediaries act as liaisons between surrogates, commissioning parents, and medical practitioners, which can blur the lines of accountability and ethical responsibility. International ethical guidelines, such as those outlined by the World Medical Association (WMA) and the Verona Principles[4] , have aimed to provide a framework for addressing these challenges. These standards emphasise the importance of transparent communication, the provision of material information about medical, legal, financial, and social aspects of surrogacy, and the need to safeguard surrogates from exploitation or coercion. For example, the WMA's Declaration on the Rights of the Patient[5] asserts that individuals have the right to make free and informed decisions about their healthcare and requires physicians to provide honest and comprehensive information to facilitate such decisions. Similarly, the Verona Principles advocate for surrogates to be in a position to make fully informed and independent choices, free from undue influence, and call for the establishment of universal ethical standards to govern surrogacy arrangements. As it has emerged, the identification of – bodily or personal – autonomy with informed consent proves to be restrictive or inadequate if analysed from an all-encompassing feminist standpoint and framing the position of a gestational surrogate. On the one hand, a purely liberal – even when feminist – view of autonomy through informed consent offers a shortsighted perspective on the interplay between social factors and women's embodiment in reproduction related decision-making. On the other hand, pre-emptively deeming the gestational surrogate's consent as ill-formed or, in any case, flawed – thus, for example, impeding all cases of commercial surrogacy due to the financial incen-

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4. The Verona Principles are a list of eighteen criteria to offer direction regarding the rights of children born through surrogacy and to establish a basis for any future regulations that must prioritize the rights of these children. Independent experts drafted them, aiming to identify the most problematic areas and to formulate procedural and safeguard requirements to ensure the protection of the rights of children born through surrogacy.

5. World Medical Association, WMA Declaration of Lisbon on the Rights of the Patient, Adopted by the 34th World Medical Assembly, Lisbon, Portugal, September/October 1981, and amended by the 47th WMA General Assembly, Bali, Indonesia, September 1995, and editorially revised by the 171st WMA Council Session, Santiago, Chile, October 2005, and reaffirmed by the 200th WMA Council Session, Oslo, Norway, April 2015.

tives – automatically strips away any agency and pushes surrogacy back with the other forms of un-waged reproductive labour. Therefore, an account for autonomous choice in reproductive decision-making must be contextually and socially informed. At the same time, women and reproductive bodies must be deemed rational regarding the decisions they make with respect to their reproductive health while fully informed and free from – explicit – coercion towards any of those decisions. The ethical and legal obligations surrounding informed consent in surrogacy arrangements demand a rigorous and proactive approach to ensure that surrogate mothers are not only fully informed, but also genuinely empowered to make decisions that reflect their autonomy, dignity, and best interests. By adhering to these principles, surrogacy practices can better navigate the delicate balance of rights and responsibilities, fostering a more ethical and equitable framework for all parties involved. Finally, the personal agency of the individual deciding to act as a surrogate and, therefore, the exercise of their reproductive rights can be considered in the context of reproductive freedom and responsibilities. Reproductive practices, as universal aspects of human existence, are constantly evolving as the historical and social context in which they exist evolves. Changes in those practices, such as the decision to act as a surrogate or to partake in a surrogacy arrangement, reflect a problematisation of reproductive liberty (Mills 2013, p. 654). Drawing from the principle of harm to imagine the limitations to the exercise of such liberty, namely the surrogate's reproductive freedom, can either end up in a paternalistic limitation of the individual's agency or in a general ban on the practice. Rather, framing the surrogate's reproductive liberty in a larger context informed by the ethical responsibility towards the other highlights the need to consider the impact of reproductive decisions on those involved. Building an account for the exercise of the surrogate's reproductive freedom can allow space for «consideration of the roles and responsibilities of others in the realisation of reproductive projects» (Mills, 2013, p. 655) and, therefore, have an actual disruptive potential of the social significance and experience of reproduction itself. Fundamentally, an account of the freedom of partaking in a surrogacy arrangement can have a transformative effect on the collective responsibility of reproduction.

Consequences: framing gestational surrogacy as a form of reproductive labour

The considerations surrounding the consent of gestational surrogates demand close attention to the lived experiences of reproductive workers, whether as mothers or surrogates. Metaphysical inquiries into the nature of gestation offer valuable insights into the complex relationship between reproductive bodies and the foetus, as well as the implications of framing gestation as reproductive labour. These perspectives are essential for developing ethical frameworks and policies that protect the rights and well-being of all stakeholders in surrogacy arrangements. Firstly, as previously outlined, the distinction between altruistic and commercial surrogacy lies in the presence or absence of monetary exchange beyond the reimbursement of the surrogate's expenses, such as medical or legal costs. Due to the morally charged connotations associated with the term altruistic, some scholars have adopted the term uncompensated to contrast with compensated surrogacy services (Joslin, 2021). The unique nature of pregnancy, along with the metaphysical interconnectedness of the pregnant body and the foetus, has shaped the bioethical discourse surrounding surrogacy. This discussion often hinges on the dichotomy between altruistic and commercial surrogacy, with the former frequently positioned as the more ethically defensible option; the common approach many countries use to differentiate acceptable surrogacy practices from prohibited ones hinges, often, on the legal distinction between compensated and uncompensated surrogacy. For instance, nations like Germany, Italy, and Spain prohibit all forms of surrogacy, whereas others, including the UK, the Netherlands, and Denmark, permit only altruistic surrogacy arrangements under their legal frameworks. On the dichotomy between commercial and altruistic. Critics of commercial surrogacy raise concerns about the potential commodification of the surrogate's body and the ethical implications of what they perceive as the "selling" of babies. The issue of commodification is closely tied to the surrogate's self-ownership as a moral agent and her autonomy over her body. This raises the critical question of whether restricting commercial surrogacy in an effort to prevent commodification inadvertently undermines the surrogate's right to self-ownership and autonomy. For these reasons, numerous scholars have examined the commodification of the surrogate's body by drawing paral-

lels to individuals providing sexual services. This comparison can frame surrogacy arrangements as inherently exploitative and objectifying, emphasising the transactional nature of the exchange and its potential to undermine the surrogate's dignity and autonomy. The objection to compensated surrogacy, much like the critique of sex work on similar grounds, is rooted in concerns about commodification and the risk of exploitation[6]. The concerns around compensated surrogacy, therefore, revolve around two main issues. First, opponents worry that compensation increases the risk of economic exploitation, particularly for low-income women of colour and women in the Global South who might become surrogates for babies of wealthier families in economically advanced countries. Critics argue that the financial incentive of compensated surrogacy may pressure women to participate in such arrangements due to a lack of better economic opportunities. Furthermore, the exchange of payment can create a power imbalance between surrogates and intended parents, with surrogates often occupying a more vulnerable economic position. Second, there is a broader concern about the societal impact of commodifying reproduction, implying that exchanging money for control over children devalues human life and undermines societal perceptions of children. While some supporters of surrogacy agree that compensation should not involve giving up parental rights, others find outright bans on compensation even more problematic (Gheaus and Straehle 2023, p. 63) The argument that the monetary exchange inherent in compensated surrogacy is intrinsically exploitative often disregards the significant contributions of women in the reproductive process. As a result, such labour is categorised under the same framework as "home production", which perpetuates the perception that women's contributions – such as providing reproductive tissue for new biotechnologies – are viewed as no different from the "natural", non-market processes of pregnancy and childbirth (Dickenson, 2007). The search for surrogates who are «driven by altruism […] because there is no greater aspiration in life than giving the ultimate gift of life to a childless couple»(Burrell, 2016,

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6. Between others, Debra Satz (1992, p. 109) opposes commercial surrogacy – and does indeed apply the same argument to the case of sex work – on the grounds that «commodifying women's reproductive labour is not that it "degrades" the special nature of reproductive labour , or "alienates" women from a core part of their identities, but that it reinforces a traditional gender-hierarchical division of labour».

p. 10.) is rooted in a gendered and class bias, where women with – what are considered as – selfish motivations are «incompatible with the feminine project of surrogacy, and profiting off a child is seen as an affront to proper motherhood and womanhood» (Hovav, 2019, p. 293). Nonetheless, even in jurisdictions where legislation regulates contracts and compensated surrogacy, the contribution of gestational surrogates can still risk being overlooked, particularly when not all permissive frameworks are designed equally. Some permissive regulations may reinforce a neoliberal perspective that fails to consider the broader social, gendered, and class discriminative dynamics in which surrogates operate. Viewing surrogacy merely as a gestational service, where the surrogate provides the environment for the fetus to develop through her bodily labour, may fall short of ensuring the necessary safeguards for the full realisation of the surrogate's bodily and reproductive autonomy. Therefore, not all permissive surrogacy regulations adequately protect the reproductive autonomy of the person acting as a surrogate, particularly in their decision-making authority during pregnancy. While some frameworks ensure the surrogate retains exclusive control over medical and reproductive decisions, others allow varying levels of involvement from intended parents, such as requiring consultation or notification regarding healthcare choices. In some cases, statutory silence or conflicting provisions enable contractual clauses that restrict the surrogate's autonomy, including behavioural mandates like avoiding smoking or alcohol. Such restrictions can undermine the surrogate's bodily autonomy and decision-making rights, raising broader concerns about gender equality and the long-term impact on the surrogate's health. The lack of mandatory independent legal counselling, or the requirement for it only prior to the agreement, further compromises the surrogate's ability to make fully informed decisions. Statutory inconsistencies create uncertainty about how disputes between a surrogate's choices and contractual obligations are resolved, potentially subjecting the surrogate's body and life to the interests of others. Moreover, the enforceability of surrogacy agreements often prioritises the stability of parental arrangements for the intended parents over the surrogate's rights. Many jurisdictions render agreements binding upon successful embryo transfer or after additional judicial procedures, limiting opportunities for the surrogate to withdraw consent. This approach challenges reproductive autonomy by treating the surrogate as bound to

agreements that may restrict her rights during and after pregnancy (Joslin, 2021, pp.442-450). These regulatory gaps and contradictions perpetuate societal norms that disproportionately regulate women's bodies, framing them as instruments for reproduction rather than autonomous agents. Protecting reproductive autonomy in surrogacy arrangements requires a balanced approach that must account for the surrogate's rights in the broader context of reproductive justice. This includes clear legal safeguards, independent counselling, and the voiding of contractual clauses that undermine the surrogate's decision-making authority. Within the framework of reproductive justice, the distinction between altruistic and commercial surrogacy fails to adequately address the inequalities embedded in the requirements imposed on intended parents pursuing their parental aspirations. Permissive legislations usually only allow heterosexual married couples to take part in a surrogacy arrangement. This raises the question: would transnational surrogacy be less influenced by racism, colonialism, and gendered discrimination if it were more accessible to LGBTQI+ individuals and couples? The likely answer is no, or at least not as long as reproduction remains centred on perpetuating normative structures, including their associated discriminations and oppressions (Stacey, 2018, p. 6). Against this backdrop of repro-normativity, some scholars advocate for alternative kinship models centred on the surrogate's agency and propose a community-oriented approach to surrogacy. This perspective calls for a transformative reimagining of reproduction and care, challenging traditional conceptions of human needs and envisioning a society beyond property based kinship and the alienation associated with reproductive labour. Leveraging advancements in technology and rethinking gestation, this vision promotes the egalitarian integration of familial structures into a classless community that prioritises collective well-being and care. Within this framework, surrogacy is reframed through a pluralistic and inclusive lens, rejecting conventional notions of family and work. It embraces a feminist ethos that recognises gestational labour not as something to be constrained by moralistic judgments but as a dynamic process supported by equitable practices and shared responsibilities. Surrogates' generosity is celebrated not as an extraordinary act but as a fundamental expression of human solidarity, vital to sustaining life globally. Yet, the transformative potential of such solidarity remains largely unexplored. By viewing surrogacy as a vehicle for fostering societal

progress, this approach shifts the focus away from outright rejection and toward its possibilities for reshaping reproduction and care in more equitable and inclusive ways[7].

From being to being bought: autonomy of the self in the transnational reproductive market

As it has been illustrated, the evolution of reproductive rights underscores a state's responsibility to provide active support and create favourable conditions for motherhood and, by extension, for the broader exercise of reproductive autonomy. International human rights law has faced criticism for not sufficiently protecting women, especially in reproductive matters (Packer, 1998, p. 91). Women, particularly vulnerable to cultural restrictions and socio-economic inequalities, such as limited employment opportunities, lack of social security, and inadequate protection from violence, face significant challenges in making meaningful reproductive choices. The discourse surrounding gestational surrogacy must focus on the reproductive decision-making rights of the woman directly involved in the process. Recognising that reproductive rights fully apply to individuals acting as gestational surrogates emphasizes their autonomy and decision-making capacity regarding reproduction, as the experience of pregnancy itself remains consistent across contexts (Finn, 2018, p. 650). To apply the rights enshrined in the Women's Convention to those acting as surrogates, it is essential to affirm their free and informed choice in relation to reproduction. This approach underscores the significance of bodily autonomy in the context of sexual and reproductive health, including the right to be thoroughly informed and educated. Reproductive justice in international surrogacy arrangements further stresses that women from various ethnic, national, social, and economic backgrounds should be able to make informed decisions about their bodies and family planning. This perspective seeks to address the inequities and disparities prevalent in surrogacy practices worldwide, particularly those resulting from "stratified reproduction"(Mohapatra, 2012, p. 191), where reproductive roles are shaped by socioeconomic status and access

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7. On this perspective, see Lewis, 2017, p. 147.

to resources. The practice of cross-border reproductive care often results in the outsourcing of reproductive labour (Mezzadri *et al.* 2021, pp. 1-21), a reality shaped by the varied regulatory environments in different countries. The ability to seek surrogacy services in one country and return with a child to the country of origin complicates the issue, as the decision often stems from a lack of reproductive resources, such as gametes and surrogacy services (Rudrappa and Collins, 2015) in the country of origin. Financial incentives aimed at compensating for these gaps in resources have created a reproductive market that prioritises economic exchanges over ethical considerations. The global fertility service market is projected to generate USD 61 billion in revenue by 2030, up from an estimated USD 13 billion in 2022[8]. This reproductive market has fostered an industry reliant on the circulation of reproductive tissues and bodies, involving a diverse range of stakeholders, including private fertility clinics, law firms, and service providers. The demand for low-cost surrogacy services has contributed to the outsourcing of reproductive labour to countries in the Global South, where women often commodify their reproductive capacities through roles such as oocyte vendors, surrogate carriers, and breast milk providers. For example, gestational surrogacy costs in the United States and Canada range from USD 90,000 to 150,000. At the same time, in countries like Ukraine, India, and Nepal, prices are significantly lower, with surrogacy services costing between USD 25,000 and 70,000 (Vertommen and Barbagallo, 2021, p. 5). India, which was once a global destination for commercial surrogacy, for intended parents coming from around the world, has now banned compensated surrogacy and only allows surrogacy options for national heterosexual married couples. As Amrita Pande notices:

> With the current ban on commercial surrogacy, India is slowly emerging as a different kind of player in the reproductive assembly line – instead of providing Made in India babies and package deals, clinics are devising ways to make optimum use of their existing technologies by establishing their clinics as human egg banks, embryology and the creation of embryos that can be exported to various countries (Pande, 2021, p. 403).

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8. As per Zion Market Research study of January 2022, the report is available online at https://www.zionmarketresearch.com/report/surrogacy-market , visited in December 2024.

This price disparity is maintained through the fragmentation of the reproductive process, where various reproductive roles are allocated according to the legal frameworks of the countries involved. For instance, oocytes may be sourced from a donor separate from the surrogate carrier, reflecting a broader techno-scientific fragmentation of the reproductive process. Vertommen and Barbagallo's (2021, p. 4) concept of «global fertility chains» illustrates how these interconnected processes are structured by a highly racialised and gendered division of reproductive labour. In many of the countries providing affordable reproductive services, women often face limited access to healthcare for their own reproductive needs, alongside high rates of infertility and maternal mortality[9]. In this neoliberal free market for reproductive technologies, «reproductive bodies formerly considered "wasteful" can be profitably transformed into sites of profit generation» (Pande, 2021, p. 397). The challenge lies in moving beyond the narrow bioethical critique of birth commodification to undertake a deeper and more nuanced analysis of its complexities, especially in the context of the Global South. Scholars addressing gestational surrogacy as labour aim to avoid reducing women in the Global South to mere resources or passive agents of consumption. Instead, they emphasise the intricate connections between intimacy, domesticity, and paid work. This issue is particularly critical when considering that concepts of bodily autonomy and consent, shaped by the neoliberal frameworks of exploitative countries, cannot be universally applied to gestational surrogates in the Global South. This is especially true when labour is deeply embedded in sexual and moral economies. Applying a reproductive justice framework to transnational surrogacy shifts the focus from simplistic liberal notions of choice and autonomy to a more complex understanding of how socioeconomic conditions and geopolitical contexts influence women's reproductive and livelihood choices. Addressing international surrogacy in this context requires a more informed perspective on the diverse backgrounds of surrogate women, acknowledging how their experiences of autonomy vary significantly based on their socio-economic and cultural situations. Many surrogate women's experiences diverge substantially from the typical portrayal of white, middle-class women in liberal feminist discourse.

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9. In her work, Roberts (2014, p. 253) highlights how, although black couples in the United States are twice as likely as white couples to be infertile, access to IVF is not promoted for black couples, nor procedures are covered for poor infertile couples.

For many, autonomy is not framed in individualistic terms but is instead deeply connected to their roles within the broader family and community structures. This approach invites a more inclusive and context-specific understanding of reproductive labour, helping to account for the structural inequalities that shape surrogacy practices across different parts of the world.

Conclusions

The exploration of the nature of the relationships among entities involved in reproduction made it possible to delineate a more informed perspective on the bodily and reproductive autonomy of individuals choosing to act as a surrogate. Thoroughly examining the consequences of each metaphysical perspective, it was possible to grasp the value of the – otherwise unexplored – ontological assumptions underlying moral and legal positions on surrogacy. Therefore, ethics and specifically bioethics have helped to navigate the concrete consequences of appealing to abstract legal concepts. The specific context of surrogacy emphasises the need for a conception of an applied ethics framework that highlights the corporeality and relationality of individuals, as well as their vulnerability and interdependence. In the context of the examination of the surrogate's autonomy and agency, such a framework reveals the limitations of neoliberal understandings of consent, especially when an approach that «invokes the value of responsibility, attentiveness, care, and solicitude in managing relationships» (Botti, 2016, p. 51) is taken. The delineation of the bio medicalised body immersed in the context of the reproductive market further exposes the shortcomings of the «neoliberal myth, according to which naturally people are free, independent, autonomous» (Furia and Zullo, 2020, p. 127) , showing the stratification of oppression that the global fertility chain creates. Focusing on the dichotomy of commercial versus altruistic surrogacy leaves in a blind spot the roots of the discrimination against reproductive bodies and the systemic de evaluation of reproductive labour more generally. Building on these insights, it is mandatory to further this exploration of how those ethical stances influence supranational regulations on surrogacy, specifically in the context of

the establishment and recognition of parenthood in cases of international surrogacy agreements.

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Ace-what? When invisibility is the opposite of a superpower. Asexuality, violence and social media
Francesca Rita Comella[1]

Introduction

Asexuality, with both aromanticism and agenderism, is one of the A's of the LGBTQIA+ community. An asexual person is often described as «someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction» (Mardell, 2016, p. 7), even if asexuality is a spectrum and this label works as an umbrella term for all those identities that fall on this spectrum (Mardell, 2016). It is important to remember this in order to understand that asexual people can experience asexuality in different ways, meaning that this definition is not static.

Asexuality and asexual people have never been the centre of discourse on sexuality, and when mentioned, most researchers have studied it only from a clinical and medical perspective «as either a bodily dysfunction that requires health interventions […] or as a psychological diagnosis that should be treated through therapeutic means […]» (Scherrer, 2008, p. 1). Other than medicalisation, asexual people have been facing multiple forms of violence and discrimination. To better highlight what asexual people have been going and still go through, Jo Teut's words, from *Asexuality, the internet, and the changing lexicon of sexuality* (Teut, 2019), will be used:

> We are told that we do not exist, that we are broken and should be fixed, that there's a pill for that, that we need some serious psychological help. We are told that our relationships are invalid, immature, and not

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allowed to receive legal recognition. We are subjected to corrective rape and interpersonal violence. We commit suicide (p. 86).

This research first explored some definitions not only of asexuality, but also of multiple forms of attraction. So as to define asexuality, both the definition that has been given by scholars and the one given by the online forum "AVEN"[2], were taken into consideration. Adding to that, it was explored how asexuality has been perceived throughout history, going from pathologization to becoming a «self-applied sexual identity» (Canning, 2015, p. 62).

After that, the focus was put on the macro context surrounding asexuality, defining the concepts of compulsory sexuality and heteronormativity. While the first is used to describe the set of norms and practices that support the idea that everyone is sexual (Gupta, 2015), the second represents the hegemonic system in which heterosexuality is the norm (Robinson, 2016) and, as a consequence, every other sexuality is seen as deviant. This macro context was taken into consideration in order to understand if and how it is connected to the phenomenon of acephobia (violence against asexual people) and the relation existing between the two of them (Gupta, 2015).

Adding to that, two particular forms of violence, corrective rape and conversion therapy, were explored more in depth than others, so as to highlight how asexuality, like other sexual minorities, is exposed to tactics that are used as a way to remind those who do not «follow the patriarchal and heterosexual behavioural norms, that they will be punished» and that «any other kind of *otherness* will be extinguished and corrected» (Doan-Minh, 2019, p.169-170) .

Moreover, it was shown how asexual people are marginalized not only by the majority of the "normative" society, but also by other marginalized identities, part of the LGBTQIA+ community. As a matter of fact, some members of the LGBTQIA+ community think that asexual people have not been through enough discrimination to be considered as queer and, on top of that, they feel like asexuals are not queer enough to be a part of the community (Oliva-Farrell, 2018).

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2. Asexual Visibility and Education Network.

At the time the research was conducted, multiple intersections between asexuality and other discourses were found, especially the ones between asexuality and race and asexuality and disability. Neither one of them was at first considered as a variable, but, in the end, it was deemed as important to explore at least one of them, even if briefly. Therefore, the last paragraph of this paper focuses on the intersections between asexuality and race, showing the different ways in which racism is perpetrated against asexual people, from both inside and outside asexual spaces. On top of that, despite the fact that the intersections between asexuality and disability were not explored as a variable of the research, it was thought to be significant to mention it, so that future research can focus more on it.

This paper aims to give an overview of what is meant by asexuality, trying to put aside the misconceptions on its meaning. Furthermore, as specific objectives, it aims 1) to explore different forms of violence and discrimination faced by asexual people, taking into consideration not only physical and sexual violence, and 2) to investigate if there is a relation between these forms of violence and discrimination and compulsory sexuality.

Methodology

The methodology that was used to discuss the topic is the combination of the analysis of the academic literature about asexuality and public comments published on social media, such as X and Instagram, related to discrimination that asexual people have experienced. The main objective, which is giving an overview of what is meant by asexuality, trying to put aside the misconceptions on its meaning has started in the introduction and it will be followed up in the entirety of the paper. The paradigm that was used is the one of constructivism, in contrast with essentialism, because of the belief that sexuality is a social construct (Foucault, 1978), and, because of that, it cannot be understood and studied according to a deterministic and static perspective.

The research that was conducted is a type of qualitative content analysis, which «is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns» (Cho and Lee,

2014, p. 1278). The research took place on social media and the type of internet-based research method that was used is called passive analysis (Eysenbach and Till, 2001). As explained by the authors, passive analysis takes place in studies of information patterns on websites or interactions on discussion groups in which there is no direct involvement of the researchers (Eysenbach and Till, 2001).

As stated above, the research took place on social media, specifically on the platforms X and Instagram, that because of their nature, «with its built-in traits of ambiguity and anonymity» (Hertlein, 2012; Whiting, Dansby Olufuwote, Cravens-Pickens and Banford Witting, 2019, p. 81), it made it difficult to define with certainty the characteristics of the participants and, since for the purpose of the research it was not relevant to do that, no particular criteria and/or characteristics of the participants were established and analysed.

The process that was used in choosing the methodology is composed of multiple steps; the first step was discovering that a famous writer had shared on the platform X a post about the "International Asexuality Day" with a comment that is very meaningful to show how acephobia is portrayed in public discourse. After this, other comments were found under this same post and also under other posts, published on X, connected to the topic of asexuality. In order to find them, some key words were used, such as, for example: "acephobia", "corrective r*pe and asexuality", "conversion therapy" and "compulsory sexuality". Some of these keywords were important to find some X accounts, whose activity focuses on reporting acephobic comments. Adding to that, some comments were found on Instagram, in the profile of an asexual activist sharing examples of how acephobia is perpetrated on the internet.

In total, about 120 comments were found, and after an in depth reading and reflection of these comments, the 16 most meaningful ones were selected, all of them written between the years 2020-2025. The 16 chosen comments were able to give a complete overview of the objectives and they were representative of the total of comments that were found. Since the sample is not large, this research cannot be considered completely representative of the phenomenon, but it can give a general understanding of it.

Because «the internet makes people's interactions uniquely accessible for researchers and erases boundaries of time and distance» (Eysenbach

and Till, 2001, p. 1103), it is important to discuss the ethical issues regarding this research. Since the research was conducted online, all the selected comments were public, therefore there was no need for informant consent (Hertlein, 2012, Whiting *et al.*, 2019). Despite that, in order to maintain the privacy of the participants, no names or other characteristics will be shared, and the comments used will be written down as quotes when they are most relevant to the discussion, which will be divided into 3 paragraphs in the next section of the paper.

As of the LGBTQIA+ community: an overview on asexuality and its history

Asexuality, despite its erasure and marginalisation, «has a rich cultural, historical, and political life» (Przybylo, 2019, p. 3), therefore it has been talked about a lot, mostly according to a clinical and medical perspective. Other perspectives have come out thanks to the development of the radical feminist movement in the early 1970s, in particular with the publishing of "The Asexual Manifesto", written by Lisa Orlando in 1972. Despite that, asexuality as «a self-applied sexual identity» (Canning, 2015, p. 62) has started developing only in the early 2000s with the creation of the online forum AVEN founded in 2001 (Ginoza and Tristan, 2014).

In order to understand the history of asexuality, it is important to define some fundamental concepts. First of all, asexuality is an «umbrella term for any identity on the asexual spectrum» (Mardell, 2016, p.6), and this spectrum includes multiple identities, such as gray-sexuality (an umbrella term inside the umbrella term of asexuality) referring to «people who experience very low amounts of (sexual) attraction; people who experience (sexual) attraction rarely or only under certain conditions; and/or people who are not sure whether they experience (sexual) attraction» (Mardell, 2016, p. 10), demisexuality «referring to those who only experience sexual attraction after developing a close emotional bond with someone» (Winer, 2024, p. 2-3), and more, all of which experience asexuality in their own different way. It is important to highlight that the purpose of using and describing labels in this work was just to give a conceptual order. The aim was not to put asexuality inside closed walls,

in a deterministic way, but to show how these "borders" and "limits" can be tight and suffocating.

The reality of it is that different asexual people give different meanings to what being asexual and being part of the asexual community mean, based on their experiences and the way they perceive their asexuality (Chasin, 2013). Because of this reason, the general definition given by AVEN of an asexual person as someone who «does not experience sexual attraction» (AVEN, 2021) is both useful and questionable. It is useful because, as CJ DeLuzio Chasin states, it is a definition that is based on attraction and that allows to include all those people who self-identify as asexual (Chasin, 2013), but, at the same time, it is questionable because it «essentializes asexuality as a static orientation marked by never experiencing any level of sexual attraction» (Chasin, 2013; Mollet, 2021, p. 44). Therefore, the definition of an asexual person that will be used in this work is the one given by Ash Mardell (2016) where they define an asexual person as «someone who experiences little or no sexual attraction» (p. 7). This allows us to understand asexuality not as a static orientation but as an inclusive and multifaceted one, where different scales of attraction can be experienced. Asexuality is opposed to zedsexuality/allosexuality referring to people who experience sexual attraction (Mardell, 2016) and some asexual people use the abbreviation "ace" to talk about themselves. Therefore, these terms were used in the text with the meanings described above.

Most people mistake asexuality with abstinence or other behaviours connected to not engaging in sexual activities, not pointing the difference between orientation and behaviour, which are not the same thing (Decker, 2015). Abstinence is directly linked to behaviour and, it refers to «the practice of refraining from indulging sexual attraction, and in particular from engaging in sexual activity with other people and perhaps also with oneself alone» (Eaton and Szustak, 2022, p. 133) which means that it has no connection with not experiencing attraction, opposite to asexuality, which, as we stated before, it is directly linked to the experience of sexual attraction that a person has, and it has nothing to do with whether an asexual person decides to engage in sexual activities or not. As a matter of fact, «some asexual people enjoy sexual activity» and «are willing to engage in sex» while others «are indifferent or ambivalent toward sex» and «some are repulsed by sex» (Decker, 2015, p. 30).

Up until this point, the concept of sexual attraction has been broadly talked about, but, in order to give an exhaustive overview of asexuality, it is significant to highlight the existence of «various types of attractions/orientations […] as operating separately from one another» (Winer, 2024, p. 2) that can either match or not, according to what is commonly known in the asexual community as the split attraction model (SAM). At first, the SAM used to distinguish only between sexual and romantic attraction (Aurea, 2021). However, recently, the model has been expanded by communities online in order to include multiple forms of attraction, in addition to the common ones of sexual and romantic attraction. The most common are: emotional/alterous attraction, intellectual attraction, platonic attraction and aesthetic attraction (Aurea, 2021). As a result, asexual people, as well as zedsexual people, can experience multiple forms of attraction, also deciding to label themselves in multiple ways if these attractions (especially the sexual and romantic one) do not match.

As stated in the beginning of this paragraph, asexuality has a wide history. Most of it is connected to its medicalisation or pathologization. Following an historical order, asexuality has been recognised from the nineteenth century by some sexologists like Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1886), Alfred Kinsey (1948) and Michael D. Storms (1980) (Stremel, 2022). The sexologist Richard Von Krafft-Ebing, in his *Psychopathia sexualis* (1889), talks about «Anaesthesia sexualis (absence of sexual feelings)» (p.42) and he distinguishes between the one «as a congenital anomaly» (p. 42) and «acquired anaesthesia» (p. 47). Both of them are restricted into being medical and/or psychological "dysfunctions".

The entomologist Alfred Kinsey is very well known for both The Kinsey Reports', putting together the *Sexual Behaviour of the Human Male* (1948) and the *Sexual Behaviour of the Human Female* (1953), and the theorising of the "Kinsey Scale", which is «a spectrum based model of hetero-homo attraction» (Przybylo, 2019, p. 12) in which he included an "X" category for those who did not experience any type of sexual attraction and/or reaction, either hetero or homo attraction (Kinsey, 1948; Przybylo, 2019). The medical and clinical point of view on asexuality has been the most recognised until the publication of *The Asexual Manifesto* (1972) by radical feminist Lisa Orlando. According to this paper, asexuality is viewed as «relating sexually to no one» (p. 2). It can be understood how in this paper asexuality is connected to a way of perceiving a specific

type of feminism that views interpersonal sex as a behaviour which implies using others in order to satisfy a need and, therefore, it is considered as a way to exploit others. Hence, asexuality is brought out of the clinical discourse and used as a "chosen lifestyle" in order to fight sexism.

Another important contribution in the journey of asexuality in being recognised as a valid sexual identity, was given by Michael Storms between the 1970s and the 1980s. He reformulated «Kinsey's scale in the form of a four-quadrant grid that includes not only heterosexuality and homosexuality but also bisexuality and asexuality, each with a quarter of the grid space» (Storms, 1980; Przybylo, 2019, p. 12). Therefore, for the first time, asexuality is considered and studied as a sexuality on a par with the others.

To conclude this brief description of asexual history, useful to show the different and changing points of view on asexuality that led to how it is perceived and recognised nowadays, it is important to highlight how asexuality has been connected for years to what in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) is defined as the "hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD)" (DSM-V; Przybylo, 2019). While asexuality, was removed as a sexual disorder in the DSM thanks to the work of scholar Lori Brotto and some asexual activists like David Jay and Andrew Hinderliter (Przybylo, 2019), HSDD was split into "male hypoactive sexual desire disorder" and "female sexual interest/arousal disorder" in the new revision of the DSM in 2013 (Winer, 2024).

Despite the ground differences between asexuality and HSDD, common readings of asexuality, still involve this clinical and medical perspective, as it can be shown in some of the comments that were found:

> Sounds like a hormonal/chemical imbalance in the body. Or it could be the suppression of sexual desire by the mind. All healthy adult humans experience some sexual attraction to men or women or both […] (Comment 1)

And also:

> Obviously they need to hear that they have issues. Preferably by a medical professional [...] (Comment 2)

From these two comments it can be shown how asexuality is still perceived as something that is connected to a bodily dysfunction and a condition needing medical attention, instead of being recognised as a valid sexuality.

Macro context: compulsory sexuality and heteronormativity

After starting the discussion introducing the main definitions concerning asexuality and giving a quick description of its history, it was fundamental taking into consideration the macro context surrounding asexuality, focusing on the role that compulsory sexuality and heteronormativity play in Western societies as forms of social control (Gupta, 2015). As Ela Przybylo (2011) writes, like patriarchy and heteronormativity are respectively for feminists and LGBTQIA+ people, the sexual world is for asexual people a form of oppression against which it is important to fight. Furthermore, the author uses the expression of "sexusociety" instead of "sexual world" as a way to highlight how, in the contemporary western reality, sexuality is continuously present everywhere (Przybylo, 2011). The use of this expression was considered important for this research because it brings attention to the pervasiveness that sexuality has in everyone's lives. With Przybylo's words:

> "Sexu" draws our attention to the incredibly central roles sexuality and "sex" play in our society; but unlike the "sexual world" which is "out there", sexusociety is everywhere, it is within us, it is us (2011, p. 446).

Everything that has been said until now was helpful to describe the expression of compulsory sexuality, meaning all the norms and practices supporting that «all people are sexual» (Gupta, 2015, p. 132) and therefore relegating non-sexualities at the margins. Adding to that, compulsory sexuality has also been studied in its intersection with heteronormativity and, the radical feminist Adrienne Rich was the one who coined the expression of "compulsory heterosexuality" in her text *Compulsory heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* (1980). In this paper, the intersection between compulsory sexuality, heteronormativity and asexuality will not be taken into consideration in this sense. Heteronormativity as a he-

gemonic system in which heterosexuality is considered as the norm (Robinson, 2016) while other sexualities are perceived as "deviant", has been taken into consideration because of two main reasons: the first reason concerns the fact that asexuality has nothing to do with heterosexuality and therefore heteronormativity oppresses asexuals as well. The second reason, directly connected to the first one, concerns the fact that asexual people receive hate from inside the LGBTQIA+ community and, they are accused of being heterosexual people who do not know what being oppressed means, as it can be shown from some comments that were found:

> As a gay man can someone tell me why straight people not wanting to get laid has ANYTHING TO DO WITH ME? [...] (Comment 3)

The ironical answer given to this comment also represents really well what has been said about asexual people being associated with heterosexuality:

> Sure, people are still killed for being gay in a lot of countries, but straight people who don't fancy a quickie are being literally ignored to death, (name of the person who wrote the previous comment). Is that what you want? (Comment 4)

 Compulsory sexuality and heteronormativity move inside the perspective of essentialism, which «is enacted not only by normative sexualities against marginal ones, but it is rearticulated and recirculated throughout all sectors of sexusociety» (Przybylo, 2011, p. 445), where "being sexual" and "being straight" are considered as natural and the norm to which everyone has to align. On the contrary, as Michel Foucault (1978) stated, «sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check [...]. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct» (p. 105). This perspective shows how every sexuality, including heterosexuality, is a social construct, which does not allow for one sexuality to be considered as 'more' than the others. To explain how compulsory sexuality and heteronormativity impact someone's sexuality, Sebastian Grace's words will be used:

In the heteronormative world of compulsory sexuality, it never occurred to me that, if I didn't like any form of physical interaction and sex especially, that there could be a word for that and that such a word could refer to a sexual orientation (Sebastian, 2015, p. 10).

Therefore, it can be concluded that the assumption that all people are sexual (Gupta, 2015) is dangerous to asexual people and, it allows for discrimination towards ace people to be perpetrated, as it will be shown in the next paragraph.

Violence and discrimination against asexual people

At this point of the discussion, violence and discrimination against asexual people, also called acephobia, was analysed. Through the analysis of the comments, it was found how asexual people are victimised even by members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Often asexual people are left out of LGBTQIA+ spaces because they are not considered as 'queer', causing them to feel isolated (Canning, 2015). Therefore, the acephobia from both the inside and the outside of the LGBTQIA+ community was taken into consideration. For the purpose of the research, only some types of violence were looked at in depth and these are: erasure, invisibility and invalidation, corrective rape and conversion therapy. In addition to these, pathologization has been analysed in the previous paragraphs.

The analysis of the comments and the academic literature also showed how the specific forms of violence mentioned above directly interact with the macro context previously described.

As mentioned multiple times throughout the paper, asexuality and asexual people undergo a process of erasure, invisibilization and invalidation. The first example of this type of violence can be found in a comment that was posted in regard to 'International Asexuality Day', saying:

Happy International Fake Oppression Day to everyone who wants complete strangers to know they don't fancy a shag. (Comment 5)

And also:

Asexuality? are they serious. I see the argument for gay people having a day or month because at one point, most states banned same-sex marriage. But celebrating people who've never faced oppression or have nothing to celebrate, I don't see the point. (Comment 6)

In addition to these, other comments were found interesting, not only for their content, but also because the people writing them highlighted how they were not heterosexual. One of these comments has already been mentioned during this discussion (comment 3), and now it will be taken again into consideration to show how asexual people (often accompanied by bisexual people) often cannot even find a space to feel valid inside LGBTQIA+ spaces:

As a gay man can someone tell me why straight people not wanting to get laid has ANYTHING TO DO WITH ME?!
I'm so grateful to have organisations like LGB Alliance in 2025 to push back against this nonsense, it's glorious to see them grow bigger and louder each year… (Comment 3)

And also:

This is the problem with lumping everyone who isn't straight into a 'LGBTQ etc' category. If asexual people don't want sex, good luck to them. But gay people quiet like it, actually. So why am I and other gays thrown in a category with them? Makes no sense. (Comment 7)

Adding to this, some comments brought up the fact that apparently ace people are often mistaken and associated to incels, for example:

Asexuals are just incels who claim they're bio-cels/psych-cels for "respectability" (Comment 8)

And also:

"Asexual" = female incel with an excuse (Comment 9)

Low status incels (Comment 10)

Oh, thats an interesting angle. They're just incels, but call themselves asexual. I can buy that, its the woke version of incel. (Comment 11)

All of this shows how there is still not much knowledge on asexuality and, that a lot of people do not recognise it as a proper sexuality like all the others.

As the comments discussed above have shown, it appears that there is a general thought that asexual people do not face any kind of discrimination and therefore, they do not have the right to exist. Despite that, the same comments have shown how this is not the reality of things and, they are indeed proof of the existence of acephobia. On top of that, academic literature and researches have highlighted how asexual people are also subjected to corrective rape and conversion therapy practices.

Conversion therapy is usually composed of religious, psychological and spiritual practices that have been used as a way to change a person's sexuality, in order to establish a heteronormative context (Babits, 2021). In the specific case of asexual people, Przybylo (2019) describes how conversion practices often take place in medical and clinical environments

> to encourage asexuals to have sex, with unwanted and coerced sex in partner contexts, through the misdiagnosis of sexual desire disorders in people who are asexual, and with invisibility, toxic attention, or the fetishization of asexual identity (p. 10).

As it can be understood from this description of conversion practices for ace people, these show a direct connection to compulsory sexuality, seeing how they mostly revolve around sex and its normativity. At this point of the research, it was considered useful to highlight some public comments revolving around ace people's experiences with conversion therapy practices. Two of them in particular seemed interesting to report:

> I had some mentors once when I was in my past abusive relationship. My ex didn't like me being ace and would yell at me for never wanting sex. My mentors told me to "grin and bear sex" to make my ex happy and satisfy their needs. Apparently my need to NOT do that didn't matter (Comment 12).

And also:

> One guy offered me a prostitute once, and he thought that would get me back on the wagon! [...] (Comment 13).

A particular form of conversion therapy is corrective rape. In the beginning it referred to rape inflicted by straight men against lesbian women as a way to 'cure' them (Doan-Minh, 2019) and change their 'deviant' sexuality. Nowadays, this term refers to rape inflicted against anyone whose gender and/or sexual identity does not conform to cis-heteronormativity by a perpetrator whose reason is to 'correct' them (Doan-Minh, 2019) and re-establish the 'norm'.

Corrective rape is rooted into the normative structure of society, in which compulsory sexuality plays a main role, as stated above. As a matter of fact, corrective rape is often perpetrated because of the belief that sex is such a fundamental part of everyone's life that rapists think that forcing an asexual person to have sex will make them understand the importance of it, or «will wake them up», using Julie Decker's words (2015, p. 61). On top of that, it is important to highlight that corrective rape often occurs inside relationships because of the belief that in a relationship sex is owed and, therefore, people can be bullied and obliged to accept it (Decker, 2015).

In regard to this topic, the comments that were found were either invalidating the asexual experience with corrective rape or they were from people highlighting how asexual people are often victims of corrective rape and other forms of violence. Some examples will be shown below:

> [...] they bring up (unproven) statistics about corrective r*pe and conversion etc etc, failing to realize that the reason any sort of corrective r*pe or other atrocity is even committed is bc[3] society misunderstands a people as a whole and thinks that they ARE gay, and that's why corrective r*pe happens [...] (Comment 14).

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3. bc is the abbreviation of because.

Aces are still victims of sa[4] and corrective r*pe though, and despite the fact asexuality is valid, they're still gatekept from the LGBTQ+ community. [...] (Comment 15)

The intersections between asexuality and race

One aspect that was not taken into consideration as a variable before the beginning of the research, was discovered and valued important while the research was conducted. This is the intersection between asexuality and race. Ela Przybylo (2019) highlights how asexual spaces are mostly white-dominated and racism can often take place. Sebastian Grace (2015) discusses that asexuality is perceived as a white sexual identity and only for white people, making non-white asexuals feel left out since they are not given a space, especially when questioning directly the relationship between asexuality and race.

An interesting perspective on the matter was given by Ianna Hawkins Owen (2018) who talks about asexuality as «a raced category desiring racial borders» (p. 73) which highlights how, even if asexuality is a sexuality that has always been left at the margins, it fails in recognizing the diversity of people that are a part of the ace community, adopting a neutral position in regard to race. As Owen (2018) says, it appears as if the differences that can be found inside of asexuality are perceived as less than the difference outside of it, which is represented by sexuality itself, and therefore, they are not taken into consideration. In this way, asexuality, instead of challenging the racial and sexual hegemonic systems, it cooperates with them (Owen, 2018). Therefore, if

[...] oppression shows itself, as a matter of fact, in the ability of a (dominant) group to impose their experience and their cisheteronormative perspective as universal, neutral, like the norm used as a parameter of comparison, or, better, standard of neutrality, originality, authenticity. (Rinaldi, 2012; Cappotto and Rinaldi, 2025, p.258)[5].

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4. sa is the abbreviation of sexual assault.

5. Author's translation from the italian version "L'oppressione si manifesta, infatti, nella capacità di un gruppo (dominante) di imporre la propria esperienza e la propria prospettiva eterocisnor-

Is it not the same thing happening inside asexuality with race?

Part of the comments used for the research were found under a black asexual activist, who receives a lot of acephobic comments, and some of them are not only connected to acephobia but racism as well. For example, in one occasion, the conversation started with an anonymous user defining them as a pedophile and after, ending the conversation with the use of the n-word. In another comment they shared, the n-word was used again:

> Asexuals look a lot like n-word tbh (comment 16)[6]

This shows how, often, different forms of discrimination, acephobia and racism in this specific case, intersect and interact with each other. As it was stated above, racism often occurs also inside the ace community. In this research, no specific examples of this phenomenon were found. But it was considered important to keep it in mind in order to investigate more on the topic and give it more space in future research. On top of that, another aspect that researchers should focus on, in future research, is the relationship between asexuality, blackness and the sexualization of asexual black bodies.

Conclusions

This paper moves from the understanding of asexuality as a valid identity, with a history and the prospect of becoming, one day, a political stance that can challenge the hegemonic systems of compulsory sexuality and heteronormativity. However, in order to do that, there needs to be a change inside the ace community as well, that allows for everyone who identifies as asexual to feel heard and included. As long as barriers are built, no systematic change can really happen.

This paper tried to discuss briefly about both a community that has always been marginalized, erased and caged inside medical discourses, and the violence that the community has faced because of this erasure. How-

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mativa come universale, neutra, come la norma che funge da parametro di confronto o, meglio, da standard di naturalità, originalità, originarietà".

6. tbh is the abbreviation of to be honest.

ever, one of the limits of this paper is that it was not possible to discuss all that concerns asexuality because of how broad the topic is. Therefore, it will be important for future research to focus on asexuality and asexuality studies, in order to pay attention to all the various intersections between asexuality and other discourses. Here the only intersection that was taken into consideration was the one between asexuality and race, even if it was discussed very briefly since it was not a variable that the research was specifically looking for. On top of that, the research that was conducted also showed how asexuality intersects with the topic of disability and neurodivergence. Multiple comments were found in regard to this, but in the research only specific comments connecting to the process of medicalisation were taken into consideration. Adding to that, some of the academic literature that was both used in the research and found in the process showed this connection. It is important for researchers to focus on this topic in future research.

Another important finding, mentioned also during the discussion in this paper, is that asexual people are often associated with incels, despite the differences between them. In this instance, no further research was conducted because it did not appear to be related to the objectives of this research. Despite that, the connection/disconnection between incels and asexuals seems like an interesting perspective to include in both asexuality and incel studies.

It can be concluded that this study showed how common acephobia is and how it is directly connected to the macro context of compulsory sexuality (especially) and heteronormativity. As it was highlighted above, it is fundamental to continue the research on asexuality and its intersections. It would also be important to pay attention to the dynamics developing inside both the LGBTQIA+ and the asexual community.

How can the fight be intersectional if every group closes behind borders and walls of essentialism that do not allow for anyone who is different to get in and be a part of a community that was actually born to celebrate diversity? When and how will the labels stop being restrictive so as to become free? When will they give freedom instead of caging everyone inside the essentialist dynamic? These are questions that still persist.

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Getting high to be a man: masculinity, health and the social meanings of substance use
Christian Di Carlo[1]

Introduction

In recent decades, there has been growing scholarly interest in the intersection of gender roles and health-related behaviors, and the link between social representations of masculinity and the different ways in which individuals care for themselves, access social and health services, and, more broadly, adopt different attitudes toward the concept of individual and collective well-being has become increasingly apparent (see, for example, Connell, 2012; Courtenay, 2000; 2009; Doyal, 2001; Verbrugge, 1985). In this sense, masculinity – or rather, masculinities – should not be understood as a natural or biological trait, but as a complex social construction, deeply stratified and situated within the specific contexts to which individuals belong. It is shaped through the repetition of practices, social interactions, and institutional mechanisms (Connell, 1995; West and Zimmerman, 1987), functioning as a normative framework that informs male behaviors, attitudes, and actions, thereby influencing men's choices, habits, perceptions, and behavioral patterns.

The norms that shape the construction of masculinities – often grounded in values such as strength, independence, self-control, dominance, and invulnerability – can represent significant barriers to healthcare access, contributing to the avoidance of medical contact and the adoption of high-risk behaviors (Courtenay, 2000). In particular, the denial of vulnerability, limited emotional awareness, and rejection of external support function as strategies for attaining social recognition of virility and acquiring/gaining "masculine capital" (De Visser and McDonnell,

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2012). At the same time, these traits function as barriers that limit access to, and reduce the effectiveness of, prevention and treatment strategies, especially in the context of addiction.

This contribution seeks to explore, through a literature review, the relationship between the social construction of masculinities and practices related to the use of psychoactive substances. Drug use should not be understood solely as a health issue; rather, it constitutes a socially meaningful practice, a performative dimension (Butler, 2025) through which men negotiate their status within historically and geographically situated hierarchies (Connell and Connell, 1996). Through acts of consumption, men – like women – *do gender* (West and Zimmerman, 1987), constructing and (re)affirming their identities in relation to culturally shared norms (Measham, 2002).

From this perspective, substance use becomes a tool through which men can reinforce their belonging to (homo)social contexts and build forms of symbolic solidarity that do not challenge their status, while simultaneously competing for recognition and prestige within those same spaces (Darcy, 2020a). Alcohol, cocaine, and anabolic steroids – as well as substances associated with more marginalized contexts, such as heroin – carry symbolic power (Goffman, 1949) that contributes to shaping male relationships, identities, and hierarchies. Therefore, substances must be analyzed not only in terms of their chemical and pharmacological "power" but also through the social meanings they acquire in relation to the context of use, their integration into daily life, and the local gender codes they invoke (see, for example, Lorigan, Snell, and Robertson, 2016; Moore *et al.*, 2020; Quintero and Estrada, 1998).

This contribution adopts a socio-constructivist and intersectional perspective capable of accounting for the plurality of masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), their diverse contextual manifestations, and the tensions characterizing the performative processes of male gender, particularly in contexts marked by socioeconomic marginalization and structural vulnerability. The aim is to highlight the transformative potential of a sociological interpretation of the phenomenon, shifting focus away from individual causes of behavior toward the social and symbolic structures that render such behaviors socially *acceptable, desirable*, or *necessary*. Such an approach may be instrumental in promoting culturally sensitive social and health interventions that recognize and respond to

the forms of masculinity performed by users, while also proposing and reinforcing alternative models more compatible with caring for oneself and others.

Studies on masculinities: theories, transformations, and critical perspectives

To critically analyze the social practices related to substance use, their relationship with the gender-specific social structure to which users refer, and the implications arising from such relationships, it is essential to first reflect on how masculinity is conceptualized in sociological discourse. Understanding what it means to "be a man", and how this social identity is constructed, performed, and regulated in different social contexts, is a necessary step in studying the phenomenon and fully understanding its complexity.

For several decades, sociological narratives were dominated by functionalist theories, particularly Parsons' (1959) *sex role theory*. This approach created an artificial dichotomy between what was considered *natural* and what was deemed *social* – with the former viewed as a residue of humankind's "brutal" primitive life, which had to be suppressed to allow "consciousness" to emerge and social order to prevail (Rinaldi, 2018). Moreover, such a deterministic and naturalizing lens on gender played a fundamental role in reinforcing the idea that this fragile social order could only survive through a dichotomy of sexual roles and their "natural" complementarity (*Ibidem*).

A significant shift for new understandings of masculinity emerged during the 1970s and 1980s, following the rise of feminist critiques of androcentrism in Western science and culture. These critiques laid the groundwork for the establishment of *Women's Studies*, creating space for women's experiences and perspectives to be acknowledged (Edley, 2017). Several scholars (e.g., Farrell, 1974; Nichols, 1975; Snodgrass, 1977), often working in collaboration with feminist activists, began to expose the constraints imposed on all individuals by the gender roles and the hierarchical power relations embedded within them. Adherence to social norms and expectations associated with the male gender role come to be seen as a practice that could negatively effect both men's and women's

mental and physical health (Goldberg, 1976). Men, too, could benefit from a "sexual revolution" that would liberate them from more "toxic" aspects of masculinity, such as the need to appear tough, aggressive, and fearless at all times (Fasteau, 1974; Harrison, 1978; Pleck and Sawyer, 1974). Many of these theories gradually adopted a more critical stance toward feminist orthodoxy, even going so far as to claim that in modern times, men had become the truly subordinated group (e.g., Benatar, 2012; Farrell, 1994; Hise, 2004; Lyndon, 1992). These arguments aimed to obscure structural inequalities by promoting male self-pity, depoliticizing feminist issues, or positioning men as victims.

The emergence of *Men's Studies* was therefore met with suspicion by feminist movements, which viewed it as an attempt by men to encroach upon a space created to amplify women's voices (Smith, 2013). For this reason, some scholars – including Connell and Kimmel – preferred the term *Masculinity Studies* to emphasize a critical perspective on men, understood as privileged subjects within the gender system (Edley, 2017).

In the context of post-industrial societies and the "feminization" of labor – which challenged traditional models of masculinity – the field evolved into *Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities* (CSMM). These studies analyze masculinity as a social and cultural construction, recognizing its diversity and its intersection with other identity markers such as class, race, sexuality, and ability (Gough and Robertson, 2010; Hearn, 2013; Hearn and Howson, 2019).

Within this framwork, several authors have made important contributions to understanding and problematization of masculinity. For example, Schwalbe and colleagues (2000) describe masculinity not as a fixed trait or biological characteristic but as a set of daily practices and performances through which men seek to claim or maintain social status, power, and recognition. These "manhood acts" are strategies for asserting dominance and avoiding being perceived as weak or "feminine". Sporting competition, for instance, is seen as a key arena for validating male identity (*ibidem*).

Pleck, in his seminal work *The Myth of Masculinity* (1981), introduces the concept of "gender role strain" – later refined in Pleck, 1995. This concept shows how masculine norms are often contradictory and difficult to fulfill. As a result, a gap emerges between the ideal man and the real man, producing what he terms "discrepancy anxiety". Gender

role strain is associated with negative outcomes such as low self-esteem, social withdrawal, and high-risk behaviors (*ibidem*). Pleck argues that traditional gender roles discourage emotional expression and self-care. This contributes to poor health and various psychosocial issues, including performance dependency, aggression, rejection of healthcare.

Spence, Helmreich, and Brannon (1985) also emphasize the role of behaviors and attitudes in reproducing traditional masculinity. They identify four central "tacit norms" that structure its cultural and symbolic framework. The first, *No "Sissy Stuff"*, prescribes a systematic avoidance of anything feminine or associated with weakness, thus distancing masculinity from vulnerability. The second, *The Big Wheel*, emphasizes success, social prestige, and the need for recognition. The third, *The Sturdy Oak*, encourages men to appear strong, rational, and self-reliant, discouraging emotional expression or the display of emotional need. Finally, *Give 'em Hell* promotes boldness, aggressiveness, and even violence as acceptable – and often expected – forms of masculine self-assertion.

A major turning point came with Connell's work, which employs a complex, multidimensional approach to analyze the construction of masculinity as a dynamic mode of organizing social practices (Connell and Connell, 1996). Connell's *relational theory of gender* proposes three levels of analysis: the macro level (the overall gender order, such as patriarchy), the meso level (social organizations and institutions), and the micro level (daily interactions). Within this framework, Connell identifies several forms of masculinity – not as rigid categories, but as typical configurations within a social system (Connell, 1995). Among these, *hegemonic masculinity* stands out as the dominant, idealized model, embodied by few but aspired to by many. Alongside it, *subordinated masculinities* (such as homosexual masculinities) represent the positions over which hegemonic forms exert dominance; *complicit masculinities* benefit from hegemonic norms without fully embodying them (e.g., through better pay); and *marginalized* or *protest masculinities* emerge among men excluded from dominant power structures, often expressed through hyper-virilized behavior and attitudes (*ibidem*).

Finally, *performative theories* offer valuable insights by viewing gender not as a fixed quality of individuals but as a social process. West and Zimmerman (1987) propose that gender is a constant activity embedded in everyday interactions – not a mere "display". Men are constantly

"doing masculinity": every action, exchange, or behavior contributes to (re)constructing what it means to be a man. Butler (2004), building on this idea, emphasizes that gender is not something we *have* or *are*, but something we *do*. Masculinity (like femininity) is a *performance* – not in the theatrical sense of playing a role, but in the sense that the act itself produces what it names. These acts of performativity – how one dresses, walks, speaks, and gestures – do not *express* a pre-existing gender, but rather *constitute* it (*ibidem*). Through the repetition and stylization of these acts, gender becomes naturalized and appears as a "fact" rather than a construction.

Gender norms and health: performing masculinity through neglect

To delve deeper into the relationship between the social construction of masculinities and substance use behaviors and habits, it is essential to focus first on health. The link between masculinity and health represents a crucial lens for analyzing and understanding how symbolic inequalities are perpetuated in our societies and the effects they produce. Epidemiological data, such as those provided by ISTAT[2], reveal a significant disparity between men and women in terms of health-preserving choices, responses to health needs, and resulting outcomes: men exhibit higher mortality rates, particularly for specific pathologies – such as cancer, respiratory diseases, suicide, etc. – and make less use of healthcare services, both general and specialist, especially in adulthood. These phenomena cannot be (superficially) explained solely in behavioral or psychological terms but require a structural approach that considers the social construction of masculinities.

Using a socio-constructivist lens, masculinities are *situated and dynamic relational practices* structured within specific institutional and relational contexts (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Their expression is strongly influenced by other intersectional and situational variables – such as gender, age, sexual orientation, social class, etc. – offering a range of differentiated and shifting configurations across time and space (*ibi-*

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2. In http://dati.istat.it/

dem). In many postmodern Western societies, men's access to healthcare is heavily influenced by internalized heteronormative systems and binary views of gender. The cultural configurations underpinning hegemonic gender norms promote an ideal of masculinity based on strength, self-sufficiency, and emotional-physical invulnerability (Courtenay, 2000), thus legitimizing men's reluctance to engage in preventive and care practices. This reluctance has tangible consequences on both individual and collective health.

The social practices underlying men's neglect of their health should not be seen merely as individual ignorance. Instead, they function as symbolic and material strategies through which power is structured and negotiated (Peralta, 2007). High-risk behaviors – such us excessive alcohol and drugs use, certain eating habits, or refusal to use safety equipment while driving – often serve as tools through which men (especially young men) attempt to embody, perform, and demonstrate hegemonic forms of masculinity (*ibidem*). These practices are heavily gendered and culturally legitimized as expressions of a "winning" masculinity, whereas similar behaviors among women would be stigmatized and associated with a loss of "femininity" (Rinaldi, 2018).

Messerschmidt (1993) emphasizes that the construction of masculinity is a situated process shaped by one's position within the social stratification system. For many working-class men, masculine performances are grounded in displays of strength and toughness, high-risk behaviors that may endanger physical and psychological well-being, and a deliberate avoidance of healthcare. These behaviors not only conform to dominant gender norms but also function as symbolic acts of resistance (Courtenay, 2000). In contexts marked by limited access to symbolic, cultural, social, and economic capital, complying with healthcare recommendations can symbolically represent submission to authority figures – namely, healthcare professionals – who often embody professional, educated, bourgeois forms of masculinity that are socially normative and dominant. (*ibidem*). Social status is thus negotiated through alternative codes, which may include preserving one's honor within the community – such as never retreating from public physical confrontation – or adopting hyper-performative expressions of sexuality (Zielke *et al.*, 2023). Denial of illness and resistance to care serve as markers of distinction and recognition of masculinity within highly hierarchical and materially insecure social en-

viroments (Totten, 2003). Even for men belonging to more privileged social classes, the rejection of care be performative, aimed at preserving and legitimizing hegemonic status: demonstrating unrealistic invulnerability and complete autonomy becomes part of masculine identity construction in contexts valuing productivity and self-control (Courtenay, 2000).

Both the display of resilience and the denial of vulnerability reinforce the stereotype of the strong and invulnerable man. This also supports the belief that the male body is inherently more efficient and functional than the female body (Courtenay, 2009). In contrast, self-care behaviors – such as accessing healthcare or adopting preventive measures – may be seen as signs of *feminization*, and thus avoided by many men to maintain status within their male peer groups (Davies *et al.*, 2000). Consequently, coping strategies frequently involve action and denial of distress, avoiding reflection or the need for help. However, this rejection of care is not uniform. Social positioning and access to material, social, and symbolic resources play a key role in shaping both the intensity and manifestations of neglectful behavior and influence the construction of gender identity (Messerschmidt, 1993).

Although masculinity practices are highly context-situated, they are not solely individual. They are collectively reinforced through media, film, advertising, and other symbolic channels that (re)present models of masculinity centered on strength, conquest, and invulnerability (Connell, 1995). Marginalized young men, often living in areas with high unemployment and scarce economic resources, face ongoing threats of *social emasculation*. In response, they develop forms of *context-specific winning masculinities* based on violence, exaggerated virility, and resistance. These traits often become the primary means to negotiate social status (Totten, 2003).

Evans and colleagues (2011) emphasize the importance of considering age as an intersectional variable necessary for understanding how gender construction and performance vary across contexts. They propose the analytical HIMM model (*Health, Illness, Men and Masculinity*), which analyzes the evolution of masculinities throughout the life cycle. According to this model, in childhood and adolescence, male identity is defined by strength and independence, exposing individuals to significant risks such as fights or road accidents. In adulthood, productivity and work-centeredness become crucial, often causing men to neglect

their health. In old age, the inability to embody the masculine traits that have defined one's life may result in identity crises and feelings of worthlessness; however, these crises can also represent opportunities for role redefinition (*ibidem*). Despite this, older men remain largely absent from public health discourse.

Life events such as becoming a father, experiencing chronic illness or disability – or the aforementioned aging[3] – can challenge (or in some cases reinforce) dominant models of masculinity within specific contexts (Kotelchuck, 2022; Shuttleworth, Wedgwood and Wilson, 2012). A clear example of this process is the onset of a chronic illness, which may compel men to renegotiate their roles, particularly when they can no longer perform a masculinity based on invulnerability and work success. In such cases, men may adopt *hybrid masculinities* (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) that combine elements of care with traditional masculinity models.

The intense performative pressures placed on the male body in neoliberal society can lead to body dissatisfaction, with potentially serious health consequences (Gültzow *et al.*, 2020). One such example is the increasing presence of eating disorders among men, which remain largely overlooked in both research and clinical practice (Strother *et al.*, 2012). Similarly, male experiences of victimization remain invisible, particularly due to the cultural stigma surrounding male vulnerability (Rinaldi, 2018)[4].

Mental health is another domain where gender norms act as both symbolic and practical barriers. In the case of suicide risk, for instance, the use of medicalized narratives allows men to maintain consistency with dominant masculine models. This occurs because such narratives frame distress in terms of "illness" rather than "suffering" (Galasiński and Ziółkowska, 2023). While this may seem like a subtle distinction, referring to illness avoids the status loss associated with emotional fragility. Within online environments – especially the so-called *manosphere* (a collection of blogs, forums, and websites where masculinity is discussed, often from anti-feminist or reactionary perspectives) – male suffering is of-

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3. The de-structuring function that aging performs about the ideal of performative masculinity can be seen in the thriving pharmaceutical market that aims to combat erectile dysfunction. See, for example, https://www.precedenceresearch.com/erectile-dysfunction-drugs-market

4. For further information on the data, see https://noviolence.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Whataboutmen.pdf?utm_source.

ten framed through a reactionary and self-victimizing lens. This framing fuels antifeminist rhetoric and obscures the structural dynamics underlying gender inequalities. In these spaces, men's difficulties are portrayed as the result of an increasingly "feminized" society, seen as emasculating and de-virilizing (McGlashan, 2023).

The market also plays a significant role in redefining masculinity in medical and performative terms. The proliferation of platforms like *Numan*[5] – a UK-based online platform focused on men's health – illustrates this trend. It offers treatments ranging from sexual dysfunction to cosmetic procedures. These services reflected a broader shift toward the medicalization of natural conditions (e.g., hair loss, reduced libido with age). Such conditions are framed as "flaws" to be corrected to conform to the neoliberal masculine ideal of being young, productive, and desirable (Putland, Chałupnik and Brookes, 2023).

Addressing the relationship between masculinity and health, therefore, requires a critical reconfiguration of both social and healthcare systems. It is essential to challenge the assumption that the masculine represent a *neutral* and *universal* norm. Instead, health approaches must interrogate gender hierarchies and the configurations of masculinity that hinder access to care.

Getting high to do masculinity and femininity: the (re)production of gender dynamics through substance use

A review of scientific literature reveals a broad consensus regarding significant gender-based differences in how men and women engage the world of psychoactive substances. These differences extend beyond the types of drugs used and methods of consumption. They include a wide range of factors, such as the motivations behind first-time use, the socio-relational contexts in which use occurs, the biographical pathways that may lead to addiction. They also involve the more or less institutionalized pathways through which substance use is interrupted or transformed (see, for example, Wagner *et al.*, 2007; McHugh *et al.*, 2018). Drug-related experiences cannot be understood apart from the gendered

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5. In https://www.numan.com/

dimensions that construct and shape them. Cultural expectations, social roles, internalized norms, and binary representations of gender all play a fundamental role in structuring individual practices and narratives that accompany them.

From this standpoint, gender must first be viewed as (1) a *social process* that shapes human interactions and gives cultural, political, and economic meaning to expressions of "masculinity" and "femininity". From this perspective, gender can be understood as an organizing principle that structures social groupings and influences the divisions between public and private spheres (Ettorre, 2004). Secondly, it is essential to understand gender as (2) a *social institution* – part of culture just like symbols, language, customs, norms, values – and functioning as a "stable" form of structured inequality: a normative and value-based system that exercises a powerful social control over eall members of society (*ibidem*). From this standpoint, drug use can be interpreted as a *performance* (Butler, 2004), a lens through which to observe how gender dynamics are perpetuated and/or transformed. Drugs thus function as *cultural tools* through which individuals assert, affirm, or negotiate their gender identity in response to sociocultural pressures and expectations.

Despite the relevance of substance-related behaviors to understanding broader social phenomena – such as the construction of gender identity – the strong cultural stigma surrounding psychoactive substances has a complex and significant impact on both research and the lived experiences of users (Moore, 2004). The term "drug" itself carries a heavily negative and generic connotation: it frames substances as inherently problematic, harmful, and immoral, while their users are automatically labeled as "deviant subjects" (*ibidem*). A meaningful sociological analysis of the phenomenon must therefore go beyond reductive interpretations and instead seek to capture its full complexity. Adopting a gender perspective can serve as a crucial tool in constructing a holistic and multifactorial scientific narrative.

Drug cultures reflect and reinforce the gender expectations, norms, and hierarchies embedded in society. The choice of substance plays an essential role in this process: some substances are culturally classified as "masculine" – such as alcohol and cocaine, which align with the image of aggression and strength required to perform a successful masculinity. Others are perceived as more "feminine", like marijuana or benzodiaze-

pines, which are associated with self-control and reduced disinhibition, in line with traditional ideals of femininity (Measham, 2002). Similarly, gendered expectations shape the experiential dimension of use: men are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors (such as consuming in public), while women are more likely to hide their consumption due to heightened stigma (*ibidem*).

Common classifications that seek to differentiate substances – for example, distinctions between "recreational" and "problematic" drugs, or between "social" and "antisocial" alcohol consumption – are not gender-neutral. These categories often reflect prevailing cultural gender norms and values (Moore and Measham, 2013). While such distinctions are typically justified on legal or health grounds, they also function to reinforce social hierarchies by segmenting consumption practices according to the user's identity, methods, and context of use. A striking example is the case of heroin. Its use in certain culturally coded environments – such as so-called "bohemian" circles – is often associated with deviant, marginal masculinity. It is even romanticized as an artistic rebellion against bourgeois norms. These representations frequently center on white men experiencing precariousness and social exclusion (Fraser and Valentine, 2008). Such portrayals *aestheticize* male suffering and obscure the position of female users. Women who use heroin are subjected to a "double stigma": one related to the danger of the substance and another tied to their transgression of gender norms. As users of "hard drugs", these women challenge the image of the "respectable woman" and are often met with particularly severe public condemnation (Ettorre, 1992).

Thus, gender is deeply embedded not only in drug use practices but also in the drug economy itself. Individuals *do gender* through the ways they navigate drug markets, present themselves to others, and interpret the meanings of their actions (West and Zimmerman, 1987; Measham, 2002). A Norwegian study by Grundetjern (2015) illustrates these dynamics through interviews with female drug dealers. The author identifies four identity management strategies: (1) *emphasized femininity*, which involves stereotypically gender traits to gain clients' trust and avoid conflict; (2) *street masculinity*, characterized by tough, aggressive behaviors aimed to gain credibility; (3) a *feminine entrepreneurial model*, based on strategic and rational management of relationships and business interactions; and (4) a *flexible and situated use of cultural repertoires*, where

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hybrid practices draw selectively all the above strategies depending on the context (*ibidem*). These strategies function as symbolic resources – what Swidler (1986) refers to as "cultural toolkits": sets of meanings, skills, and codes acquired over life, through which individuals – in this case, women – make sense of and legitimize their behaviors and strategies.

"Deviant" masculinities: gender constructions and psychoactive practices among men

Substance use represents a powerful means through which masculinity can be constructed, negotiated, and *performed*. In particular, drugs may serve as a way for men to assert their identity in contexts where access to hegemonic masculinity is restricted or unattainable. As Connell (1995) notes, this dynamic is especially evident in environments shaped by *marginalized*, *subordinated*, or *complicit* masculinities, which may turn to substance use as a strategy for establishing a socially recognizable and legitimized masculine identity.

Paradoxically, despite the widespread prevalence of substance use among men[6], public discourse on drugs tends to render male users less visible than other groups, such as women and adolescents. This process of invisibilization is fueled by the naturalization of masculine traits – particularly risk-taking – which desensitizes public perception and legitimizes substance use as a form of *exploration* or *sensation seeking* (see, for example, Donohew *et al.*, 1999; Ersche *et al.*, 2010).

The dominant cultural model of what it means to be a "real man" in Western societies values characteristics such as independence, self-control, strength, and fearlessness (Helmreich and Brannon, 1985). Within this framework, drugs take on important symbolic functions: they allow men to demonstrate these characteristics and their belonging to a particular group or social status. Darcy (2020b) identifies at least three primary functions that drug use can serve for men: *sensation seeking*, which expresses virility and transgression; *social facilitation*, often driven by peer pressure and the need to conform within certain social enviroments; *stress management*, as a coping strategy in response to the ongoing pressure to

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6. For an analysis of quantitative data, see http://dati.istat.it/.

perform a credible masculinity and avoid losing status in front of other men. These motivations form what Darcy calls the *masculinity paradox* (*ibidem*): the very practices intended to affirm masculine identity often end up undermining it, resulting in self-destructive outcomes. Similarly, he introduces the concept of the *psychoactive paradox* (Darcy, 2020a) to describe the dual function of substance use. These behaviors can operate both as tools for masculine competition and domination and, paradoxically, as mechanisms for fostering connection, promoting inclusion, and challenging the *status quo* imposed by traditional gender norms.

Furthermore, specific substances carry performative value in terms of status. For instance, cocaine is often used as a *status symbol,* enacting a form of successful masculinity associated with economic power (Goffman, 1956). In contrast, prolonged heroin use may result in *symbolic emasculation*, as users are perceived as "dysfunctional" by those who engage in more "recreational" or socially accepted consumption practices. This distinction contributes to internal hierarchies among different expressions of masculinity (Darcy, 2018).

To fully grasp the relationship between substance use and the construction of masculine identity, it is essential to consider the cultural and spatial contexts in which such practices take place. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that masculinities are situated configurations of practices – both discursive and non-discursive – shaped by how individuals respond to both external tensions (such as the distance from hegemonic ideals) and internal tensions (such as the adherence to local gender norms). Thien and Del Casino (2016) further emphasize the importance of the socio-spatial dimension in the (re)production of masculinities. They show how high-risk behaviors, like substance use, can serve as symbolic responses to conditions of social marginalization – for instance, widespread unemployment and poverty.

The work of Quintero and Estrada (1998) exemplifies how context shapes specific models of substance use. Their research focuses on *tecatos* – men who use heroin at the U.S.-Mexico border – and demonstrates that drug use in this setting must be understood not merely as a health issue, but primarily as a survival strategy and a means of constructing status within marginalized environments. Drawing on Bem (1981), the authors argue that male behaviors should be interpreted through the lens of local cultural, economic, and symbolic frameworks.

In other contexts, the use of substances such as steroids and supplements – particularly within communities of practice like bodybuilding – is closely linked to dominant ideals of the male body, which must appear virile and controlled. In these cases, the performance of masculinity shifts to the realm of physical prowess (Moore *et al.*, 2020). The acceptability of such behaviors is highly dependent on the subcultural context: what is normalized in one community may be heavily stigmatized in another (*ibidem*).

Lorigan, Snell, and Robertson (2016) analyze the life story of Tony – a former member of a motorcycle gang in New Zealand – to illustrate how masculine identity in that context is intertwined with ritualized violence, emotional suppression, and displays of group loyalty. In this environment, drug use and abuse function as key tools for identity affirmation.

Finally, *homosocial spaces* – such as bars, parties, private homes, or even the streets – play a crucial role in the negotiation of masculinity. These are settings where core masculine traits/gender performance, such as resilience, strength, and self-control, are actively enacted and reinforced (Darcy, 2020a). At the same time, care spaces – including social and health services – can also function as arenas where men either renegotiate or resist reworking traditional expressions of masculinity. In doing so, these contexts may offer opportunities for symbolic transformation (Wilton, DeVerteuil and Evans, 2014).

Conclusions

The analysis presented here highlights the importance of critically examining the intersections between gender, health, and substance use practices, with particular attention to the influence of hegemonic gender norms on men's access to care and their engagement in high-risk behaviors (Saltonstall, 1993). These practices represent situated strategies through which individuals negotiate status, belonging, and recognition within contexts marked by profound structural inequalities. From this perspective, substance use acquires a significant performative and relational dimension, contributing to the (re)production of specific forms of masculinity rooted in culturally situated and localized codes (Kaufman, 1994).

In light of these insights, it is essential to promote social and health-care interventions that both recognize and problematize gender dynamics – by addressing the complex relationship between men and care institutions (Teese, Van Doorn and Gill, 2023). The development of culturally sensitive prevention and treatment strategies aimed at deconstructing traditional gender norms and strengthening emotional and relational skills (Wilton, DeVerteuil and Evans, 2014), is crucial for providing service accessibility. Such strategies can also help open up symbolic (re)negotiation spaces, fostering and legitimizing alternative models of masculinity that are more compatible with the care for oneself and for others.

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Becoming a man (online): how digital environments shape contemporary masculinities. An interdisciplinary perspective on incel ideology

Vincenza Myriam Scaduto[1]

Introduction

The existence of subcultures that target women for their perceived role in upholding male subordination through manipulation and subjugation is becoming increasingly evident. Among these subcultures, this analysis focuses on the *manosphere* and its subsets[2]: online groups bound together by an interest in male-rights and anti-feminism (Ging, 2019; O'Malley, Holt and Holt, 2022) mostly frequented by heterosexual cisgender men (Crepaldi, 2022); this paper will focus particularly on the *involuntary celibate* subculture.

The contribution adopts a critical literature review to examine how the incel communities has been theorized within academic discourse. The aim of this article is synthesizing and analyzing existing literature – mainly peer-reviewed articles that goes from 2017 to 2024 – also offer a comprehensive perspective that explores variation in focuses, methods and findings of these studies. The review draws on researches from different branches of the social sciences, such as gender studies criminology, sociology and media and communication studies, in order to embrace an interdisciplinary perspective that reflects the complexity of the phenomenon, allowing a more nuanced understanding of how issues such as

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1. Department of Cultures and Societies, University of Palermo.
2. We can find a multitude of different communities inside the virtual spaces of the manosphere: *Men's Rights Activists* (MRA), *Men Going Their Own Way* (MGTOW), *Pick Up Artists* (PUA) and *Involuntary Celibates (*Incel*).*

gender, radicalization and online communities intersect in the context of online male spaces.

The specific objectives of this review comprehend:

1. To trace the emergence and development of online male communities;
2. To deepen the understanding of incel communities, focusing on their values, narratives and symbolic repertory;
3. To explore the connections between incel subculture and broader social, cultural and gender norms;
4. To investigate potential pathways out of the *inceldom*.

The studies reviewed adopt a wide range of methodological approaches. *Quantitative* methods often involve computational techniques such as language processing and automated content analysis to detect and measure misogyny, hate speech and toxic content in online incel spaces – forums and comment sections. Others rely on *qualitative* methodology such as digital ethnography, thematic analysis of contents on social media and forums, and analysis of manifestos of those implied in violent acts. A few authors have also succeeded in conducting interviews with current and former incels.

The manosphere

The origin and development of the manosphere is well illustrated by Lisa Sugiura (2021): its roots can be traced in the creation of the Men's Right Movement (MRM), in the 1970s, which was initially connected to the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM), as they advocated each other recognizing the negative influence of patriarchy on both women and men. However, shortly after, a segment of the MRM perceived their social status as diminishing, and tensions arose from some men's refusal to recognize that, on one hand, they are subject of certain pressure but, on the other hand, they benefit from privileges that come with the patriarchy. The MRM carried the notion of *sex role symmetry*, arguing that men and women were *equally* oppressed by sexism – depoliticizing the concept of oppression – and distanced themselves from the feminist movements

claiming to be subjected to various forms of oppression from women and describing feminisms as misandrist movements. By the late 1970s, the MLM had transformed in anti-feminist MRA (Men's Right Activists). The MRA's pre-web concerns – although these discourses continue in the contemporary manosphere – were about (1) feminism's perceived attack toward fatherhood and the conviction of a legislation in favor of women, (2) challenging feminists studies that evidenced the gendered nature of domestic abuse and anti-violence policies to protect women, and (3) fighting against what they perceived as unfair divorce proceedings.

As illustrated, the contemporary online manosphere has an offline background: it was only in the early 2000s the moment in which the manosphere – a decentralized network of forum, gaming platform, and chat room characterized by misogyny and satire – became an online space to share a common point of view concerning reality for those men whose goal is to regain a – perceived – lost dominant role in the society: quoting Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser (2019, p. 5008), «recent developments in the digital media environment have been crucial to constructing what is referred to as the manosphere».

In addition, Cosimo M. Scarcelli (2021) offers an important contribution concerning the manosphere: he distinguishes between the *central* and *peripheral manosphere.* Through his interview-based research on WhatsApp chats attended by adolescents, he analyzes the way they interact, revealing the connection between the manosphere as it is known by the academic and media discourses, and a type of manosphere not yet explored but impactful on men's identity to the same extent: while the central manosphere explicitly reproduces anti-feminist and gender-focused discourses, the peripheral manosphere is *non-public* and its topics are not necessarily based on gender related issues, operating more subtly. Even the connection is not that explicit, yet it can be found in the discourses inside WhatsApp groups, which aims to protect the *status quo* of gender relations through the exclusion of the out-group, girls; in addition, some images and meme proposed on the peripheral manosphere are produced – and reifies their ideologies – by the subsets of the central manosphere. Scarcelli shows how *doing gender* (West and Zimmerman, 1987) online is not a marginal phenomenon: rather, the manosphere exemplifies how online discourses become a site of *gender performativity*, where digital interaction shapes real-world perceptions of masculinity.

The role of web 2.0

In the creation of the manosphere as a *transnational phenomenon*, the extension of digital technologies and their accessibility plays a critical role (Fanucchi, 2023), hence the importance of introducing the concepts of Web 1.0 and Web 2.0[3]. Deborah Lupton (2013) makes a clear distinction between the two: Web 1.0 was based on websites in which users could view information, but played only a minor role in creating content; in the early years of the twenty-first century, Web 2.0 emerged as a consequence of the spread of technologies such as smartphones and social networks, in which users have an active role, represented by the opportunity of posting content. As the scholar highlights, researchers should pay attention to some questions when analyzing digital environment:

> How do people in different social groups use digital technologies when they do have access to them? What capacities and understandings do they need to possess to use them effectively and how does their social positioning affect these? How do pre-established assumptions about gender, age, education, social class, ethnicity/race and people's capacity to use digital media influence their use? To what extent do certain types of digital media use exacerbate or alleviate social disadvantage? To what extent do certain types of digital media use exacerbate or alleviate social disadvantage? (Lupton, 2013, p. 8).

New communication media are focused on interaction between users, having an important role for the creation and redefinition of one's identity, even in gender relationship dynamics: using social networks, as in offline activities, an individual must present and re-define a self-representation (Dordoni e Magaraggia, 2021). Web 2.0, in fact, also allowed the proliferation of what Adrienne Massanari (2017, p. 333) calls *toxic technocultures*: «toxic cultures who are enabled by and propagated through sociotechnical networks» that flourish in environments of limited responsibility and anonymity; this dynamic can also be explained by John Suler's (2004) concept of *online disinhibition effect*. The scholar distinguishes between *benign* and *toxic* disinhibition; while the first one

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3. The term was used for the first time by Tim O' Reilly (O' Reilly, 2005) as a reference to the rebirth of the web.

occurs when people share their emotions and show kindness to other users, the second one is present when the discourses are based on rude language, anger and hatred – as in the incel communities.

Echo chamber and filter bubbles

The metaphor of the *echo chamber* was introduced by Cass Sunstein (2001; 2017) and it can be defined as a space where individuals interact with like-minded others, being exposed only to information and opinions that will reinforce their pre-established beliefs. This dynamic is further intensified by the algorithmic curation of content in social media (Terren and Borge, 2021), based on the user's past activity, it is the case of *filter bubbles*. We owe the concept to Eli Pariser, who gives a clear definition of the phenomenon of algorithms bias:

> A filter bubble is your own personal, unique universe of information that you live in online. It's a bubble because you're alone in it. A filter bubble is the result of a personalized information ecosystem that shows you what it thinks you want to see – but not necessarily what you need to see (Pariser, 2011, p. 52).

As a result, exposure to diverse content and perspective is reduced, and the users are exposed to ideologically aligned content in their feed, fostering ideological polarization. Some scholars – such as Pariser (2011), Sunstein (2017) and Terren and Borge (2021) – have noted how this tendency is linked to two different phenomenon: (1) *homophily*, that is the human tendency to associate with similar others (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook, 2001); (2) *confirmation bias*, that consists in seeking and interpreting information in a way that confirms one's pre-existing beliefs (Nickerson, 1998).

In the case of the incel communities, their members form connections with like-minded individuals through online platform, reinforcing their grievances and creating an echo chamber (De Roos, Veldhuizen-Ochodničanová and Hanna, 2024). Without the internet, the members of these virtual communities wouldn't have the possibility to discuss and interact and, consequently, «would have had no way to recognize themselves as

"Incels" and learn the culture and particular idiom that cements the Incel worldview» (Baele, Brace and Coan, 2019, p. 20).

The pervasive influence of digital platforms on online experiences is largely driven by algorithms. To assess how these algorithms affect user behavior, Kostantinos Papadamou *et al.* (2020) analyzed 18.000 YouTube video shared on incel-related platforms and 18.000 random videos to understand the general trend on YouTube, trying to discover – among other research questions – if YouTube recommendation algorithm somehow contribute to steering users toward incel communities, finding out that «when a user watches an "other" video, if he randomly follows one of the top ten recommended videos, there is a 6% chance that he will end up watching an Incel-related video» (Ivi, p. 9), expressing preoccupation for the rapid expansion of these communities, facilitated by the web itself.

Defining incel communities

A portmanteau of the words "involuntary" and "celibate", the term incel refers to distinct online communities – subsets of the wider manosphere – composed of individuals who perceive themselves as involuntarily unsuccessful in sexual and romantic relationships (Sugiura, 2021; Crepaldi, 2022). "Incel" is an umbrella term used to represent multiple online platforms – all frequented by self-identified incels – which, despite their similarities, differ in content, tone, and the level of hate expressed. However, the phenomenon is *not* recent: the first blog was launched in 1997 by a woman, Alana (Crepaldi, 2022; Czerwinsky, 2024; Dordoni e Magaraggia, 2021), who opened a blog – *Alana's Involuntary Celibacy Project* – for those who identified as "invcel"[4], to share and discuss about their experiences of involuntary celibate and seek support, «regardless of their gender identity or sexual orientation» (Czerwinsky, 2024, p. 197). These early support communities also identified inceldom as a temporary life circumstance. Over time many incel-related platform began to emerge across the internet, gradually diverging from the characteristic of inclusivity of Alana's blog and turned into misogynistic spaces connected

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4. Later shortened to incel due to an easier pronunciation

to the manosphere, which platforms facilitate the spread and reinforcement of gender-based resentment. (*Ibidem*)

The structural logic underpinning incel communities reflects what Val Plumwood (1993) defines as *radical dualism*: a way of categorization based on binary oppositions where one category is constructed as superior and the other one as inferior. Applied to the incels social worldview, the *ingroup* (incels) is portrayed as victimized, misunderstood, intellectually superior – evidenced by their ability to uncover the truth of society dynamics (Baele, Brace and Coan, 2019); the *outgroup* (women and attractive men), on the other hand, is denigrated, blamed for the social exclusion incels experience.

Roberta L. O' Malley, Karen Holt and Thomas J. Holt (2022) give an important contribution in defining the incel communities as a subculture; investigating them through a subcultural and ideological lens, they analyzed 8.324 posts from two different forum, identifying five *normative order*[5] that structure these communities: (1) perception about the sexual market, (2) women as naturally cruel and (3) men as an oppressed group, (4) the legitimation of violence, especially against women and (5) the ways members legitimize masculinity. The scholars highlight how these online spaces give the opportunity to create sense of community and facilitate the formation of subcultures in which individuals construct a shared value system.

The Redpill Theory

The first three normative orders outline the core assumptions of the Redpill theory. Many incels pursue the so-called redpill theory, mainly because it provides a means to avoid the responsibility for their perceived failure in romantic and sexual relationships (Crepaldi, 2022); the analogy originates from the film Matrix, in which the protagonist – Neo – has to choose between the *bluepill* (and still remain unaware of the real world he is living in) and the *redpill* (becoming aware of the real world): taking the redpill represents the only way to comprehend the "real" dynamics of

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5. Quoting Herbert (1998, p.348), the scholars define normative orders as an analytic concept that describes «a set of rules and practices centered around a primary value», comprehending both formal and informal characteristic that *structure* and *guide* responses.

the society, to expose male oppression (Sugiura, 2021; Crepaldi, 2022; Ging, 2017).

Biological and *psychological essentialism* guides the redpill theory, assuming men and women would have *inborn* characteristics that differentiate them in two separate binaries (Sugiura, 2021). The central point of these beliefs is that human behavior and psychology have evolved to maximize gene reproduction and, assuming this to be true, men and women have different reproductive interests (Van Valkenburgh, 2018). Inside these communities, men perceive themselves as the victims of a *gynocentric* gender system, supporting the concept of *sexual market*, which disadvantages men considered less desirable and become a barrier to sex among incels. The sexual market would be hierarchical and dependent on what is called *sexual market value*, which includes physical attractiveness and money (O' Malley, Holt and Holt, 2022): women – the ones who would lead the SM by virtue as their higher SMV – as a consequence of *evolution*, *biology* and *culture* will select males with better genetics, mainly evidenced by the physical appearance, and will pursue what it's called *hypergamy* (Crepaldi, 2022); that is to say, incels rank men and women in a scale that goes from 1 to 10 (based on look and status) and, following their ideas, women would prefer men who sit at the top of the hierarchy. There are, in fact, two additional elements that reinforce this concept: first, the *LMS theory*, according to which men shall have three specific characteristics to be perceived as appealing to women: *look*, *money* and *status* (*ibidem*); the second one is a reinterpretation of Pareto 80/20 rule[6] – the 80% of the most attractive women compete for the 20% of the most attractive men, and the remaining 80% of men compete for the remaining 20% of women (Sugiura, 2021). As Shawn P. Van Valkenburgh (2018) has argued, the sexual market is an «attribution of capitalist-economic logic to sexual relationships in which women become *sellers* and men become *buyers of sex*» (p. 15), as shown in the way they economize sexuality, objectifying and commodifying women; besides, «the sexual market value amounts to a quantification of sexualized human bodies, reducing them to rationalized exchange values and rendering them commensurable in the sexual marketplace» (*ibidem*).

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6. Pareto rule, also known as the 80/20 principle, is a concept introduced by the economist Vilfredo Pareto. It suggests that 80% of the effects come from 20% of causes.

Women, inside the incel communities, are divided in different categories – *Stacy*, *Becky* and "*femoids*" – that Lauren Menzie (2020) affirms being a demonstration of *femmephobia*: «widespread system of oppression to dichotomize and police bodies that make use of feminine signifiers outside of patriarchal expectations» (Ivi, p.6); in other words, femininity, when it fails to perform as dictated by the patriarchy system, become further devalued and stigmatized. The first category - the *Stacy* - represent the most attractive woman, critiqued for only providing sexual access to Chads[7], and is a demonstration of femmephobia toward women who display a hyper-feminine performance. The second category – the *Becky* – represent a relatively attractive woman, who will pursue the dynamic of the hypergamy discussed; the use of this category demonstrates a more "flexible" femmephobia, headed to different feminine performance. The last category, *femoid*, is the most common derogatory term used in incel communities referring to women; portmanteau of the words "female" and "humanoid", it serves as a means for *dehumanize* women. Dehumanization, as Chiara Volpati (2014) argues, is a means for psychological and social oppression, which can lead to legitimating violence by removing the target's moral status. Furthermore, despite the existence of women who identify as incel (Sugiura, 2021), they are not welcome in the communities and defined as *femcel*, whose legitimacy is rejected due to the idea that women «will always be able to procure sex» (Ivi, p. 35). As Dordoni and Magaraggia (2021) states, «we find ourselves in a virtual place where gender symbolism is aggressive, hangry and violent toward women and victimizing toward men»[8] (p. 56).

There is a *nihilistic* extension of this ideology too, the so-called *blackpill*. This ideology fragment is comprised of commonly held beliefs by incels (such as the sexual market, the hypergamy, the 80/20 rule and lookism) but, while the *redpilled* members can set for themselves the goal to increase their esthetic[9] to enhance the opportunities of finding a partner, the ones who join the blackpill have a radical perception: no matter how hard they try, they'll never leave the *inceldom*, never escape from the social hierarchy that excludes them (Sugiura, 2021; Crepaldi, 2022).

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7. Chad is the representation of the most attractive man, as Stacy for women.
8. Author's translation.
9. A process defined *lookmaxing*.

Levels of violence

In the European Commission report about incels – *Incels: a first scan of the phenomenon (in the EU) and it's relevance and challenges for P/CVE* (2021) – is highlighted how incel communities play a role in a multilayered system of violence that manifests across *personal*, *interpersonal* and *societal levels*. It is important to note that not all incel are a threat, but their ideology has the potential to cause harm both within the community and toward wider society (Sugiura, 2021).

For what concerns the *personal level*, an interesting contribution comes from Sarah E. Daly and Albina Laskovsov (2022), in which they analyze post related to suicide shared by members of incel communities on Reddit[10]. They examined 80 posts revealing the ways in which they shared the necessary means to commit suicide; hence, these groups can influence the mental health of incel, particularly the vulnerable ones. Similarly, as highlighted in Sugiura (2021) analysis of mental health questions and discussion on the platform incels.co, the majority of respondents reported suffering from psychiatric disorders such as depression and anxiety.

The European Commission report about incel (2021) define the so-called *interpersonal* level too, which refers to the hostility towards women and normative men, that can result in online verbal aggression and harassment – and, sometimes, in real-world violence.

The *societal level* refers to mass violence committed by incels – as Elliot Rodger and Alek Minassian[11]. Bruce Hoffman, Jacob Ware and Ezra Shapiro (2020) distinguish four categories of incel attacks that links with the societal level: (1) *clear incel-motivated terrorist attacks*, which includes acts of violence with explicit ideological aims, primarily driven by inceldom; (2) *attacks with mixed motives* that evidence incel ideological influence, referring to acts not expressly perpetrated for ideological purposes,

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10.   https://www.reddit.com/ (last accessed 13th November 2025)

11.   For details regarding Elliot Rodger attack see https://edition.cnn.com/2014/05/26/justice/california-elliot-rodger-timeline;https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2014/05/25/video/california_il_killer_di_santa_barbara_annuncia_la_strage_in_un_video-422641590/ (last accessed 13th November 2025)

For details regarding Alek Minassian attack see https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-suspect-in-toronto-van-attack-described-as-socially-awkward-tech/; https://www.repubblica.it/esteri/2018/05/14/news/strage_di_toronto_un_killer_tra_neonazi_e_odio_per_le_donne-196355701/ (last accessed 13th November 2025)

even if the perpetrator identify as incel; (3) *act of targeted violence perpetrated by self-professed incel*, which includes acts of violence in which the perpetrator refers to himself as an incel but is not firmly situated within the community; (4) *ex post-facto inceldom*, in this case is the community itself that induct past attackers into heroes in their contents.

Hegemonic masculinity

The narrative to which incel adhere should also be understood in relation to what Raewyn Connell and James W. Messerschmidt (2005) define as *hegemonic masculinity*, referring to the process of construction of masculinity; hegemonic masculinities can be defined as a pattern of practices that legitimize the dominance of some men over other men and women, and have two main characteristics: (1) they always are constructed *in relation* to women and nonhegemonic masculinities – *complicit*, *subordinate*, *marginalized* and *protest* masculinities[12] – and (2) they *legitimate* unequal gender relation between men and women. Those who do not embody the ideals of hegemonic masculinities can feel compelled to prove their masculinity to other; this is, for some scholars, the case of incel communities' members.

Christopher Vito, Amanda Admire and Elizabeth Hughes (2017), for example, examine the narrative used by Elliot Rodger – the perpetrator of the mass killing that occurred in Isla Vista, California – in his manifesto *My twisted world: the story of Elliot Rodger[13]* through the theoretical framework of hegemonic masculinity, trying to determinate how he constructed and understood his masculinity. In this research – citing different scholars such as Ricciardelli, Clow and White (2010); Whitehead (2002); Bordo (1999); Kimmel (2008); Carpenter (2005); Pascoe (2007) – they discuss about the fundamental practices of hegemonic masculinity: first,

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12. *Complicit* masculinities do not directly embody hegemonic masculinities but help sustain them and, also, gain benefits from gender inequality; *subordinate* masculinities are defined as deviant and delegitimized by hegemonic masculinities; *marginalized* masculinities are discriminated primarily due to characteristics that are external to gender relations; *protest* masculinities are constructed as compensatory hypermasculinities emerging in reaction to a perceived lack of power (Messerschmidt, 2018).

13. https://www.karenfranklin.com/files/rodger_manifesto.pdf (last accessed 13th November 2025)

the physical embodiment of masculinity depends on *strength*, *height* and *size* – with the male bodies being a sociocultural product that requires constant care to adhere to the ideals, risking appearing less masculine or feminine if not conforming; second, heterosexual sex is used for establish one's status among other men. In fact, inside incels discourses, these characteristics would be essentials to live a fulfilling life. The scholars show how Rodger was unable to uphold these ideals and «eventually concluded that his use of violence was appropriate for reclaiming his place within the gender hierarchy» (Vito, Admire and Hughes, 2017, p. 14).

Jan C. Andersen (2024) – who did a digital ethnography studying 927 threads posted in three different incels forum – uses Erving Goffman's (1965) *stigma theory* to analyze the way incels manage the stigma derived by not conforming to hegemonic masculinities, identifying three specific strategies: (1) *normification*, that consists in compensating for hegemonic masculinity through physical and mental efforts to minimize the difference between them and the perceived sexually successful men, for example with lookmaxing; (2) *minstrelization*, which involves over-conforming to the stereotype the dominant culture attributed to them, exaggerating the differences between the in-group and the out-group; (3) *militant chauvinism*, which implies rejecting and distancing themselves from current social norms about masculinity.

Also, Debbie Ging (2017) tries to determinate how manosphere members position themselves through discursive practice inside the platforms – conducting a qualitative digital ethnography done across the manosphere most frequently cross-referenced sites. The scholar affirms that masculinities performed, through toxic practices, inside these spaces «have *both* the intention *and* the effect of reasserting male sexual and cultural dominance» (Ivi, p. 11) and define them as *hybrid masculinities*, whose self-positioning as victims of feminism allows them to distance themselves from hegemonic masculinity and, at the same time, reinforce the existing hierarchies of power and inequity. The concept of hybrid masculinities seems the more adequate to express (1) the way these individuals both reject and reify aspects of hegemonic masculinities and (2) the way these individuals may position themselves in radically different discursive practices in the online and offline spaces.

The fine line between online and offline

The assumption that online discourses are detached from real-world impact is misleading. Emma Pitman (2018), in writing about the pyramid of misogyny, states «no man is an island, and no man offends in isolation»; the concept of a pyramid model express the idea of how minor acts of sexism – when normalized and shared – support the escalation toward more explicit and violent forms of oppression; applied to the analysis of this contribution, the rhetoric and narratives advocated in online subcultures are *symptomatic of, reinforcing and reinforced by* forms of misogyny normalized in the western culture (Sugiura, 2021); although the dynamic of incel communities would not exist as it does without the intervention of technologies, many of these values predate and continue to persist outside the digital sphere. Sexism is not confined to these groups, rather it pervades the wider societal perspective and behavior, that's why pathologizing incel as deviant other, distinct from other men, is problematic: «their attitudes are actually symptomatic of structural misogyny» (Sugiura, 2021, p. 120).

Furthermore, incels discourses can be understood within the broader framework of *rape culture* (Herman, 1989; Buchwald, Fletcher and Roth, 1993). Rape, far from being the consequence of an individual pathology, is a product of the cultural system, sustained by beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that normalize men sexual aggressions and women's subordination. Rape culture gives life to a culture of *non-consent* (Sugiura, 2021), where women have no sexual agency, no power over their own bodies. The use of dehumanization, and the affirmation of sexual access as a male right inside the incel communities reflect a symbolic environment in which sexual violence is normalized and justified, through language, memes, and ideological beliefs that reinforce their sense of *aggrieved entitlement*[14] (Kimmel, 2013) and women objectification. Both rape culture and incel blame women for men's violence: the idea – pursued by incel – that women provoke violence by rejecting "nice guys" and choosing "Chads" reinforces the narrative in which men's aggressions are a consequence of women's freedom.

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14. The term is used by the sociologist Micheal Kimmel (2013) to represent that sense of having been deprived of something to which one believes they are rightfully entitled, particularly among men who perceive a loss of status or power.

Out of the inceldom

While the incel communities are often framed through the lens of radicalization, it is crucial to recognize that being incel is not necessarily a permanent or immutable state. Several studies (Sugiura, 2021; Crepaldi, 2022; Daly and Laskovsov, 2022) and institutional reports highlight that many self-identified incels are young men struggling with emotional distress, social isolation and a sense of rejection. As the European Commission report (2021) emphasize, incel forum often operate as informal emotional support networks, offering virtual spaces where users can express feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and shame. The report notes that «there is a lack of alternative online spaces for men and boys to engage in discussion about sexual relationship, dating, rejection and shame» (Ivi, p.17). In this sense, the incel communities can be interpreted as a compensatory environment, filling the void left by inadequate mental health resources – often financially prohibitive and avoided due to social stigma –, rigid masculinity norms, and social taboos surrounding male vulnerability.

As Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro (2020) observe, this sense of distress can be transformed into more dangerous forms of engagement; the underlying suffering – rather than being addressed – becomes weaponized, often directed toward women and society at large. The scholars claim that

> There is nothing inherently wrong with a community of young people who have trouble finding love and relationships forming online support groups. But the ongoing vilification of a targeted out-group with extreme rhetoric and violent suppression represent a grave danger – it harnesses real sadness and frustration, turns it into hatred, and focuses it in harmful directions (Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro, 2020, p. 25).

This transformations from emotional pain to ideological extremism points to a crucial area for early intervention: the author suggests that providing better mental health access would probably influence the trend toward *non-ideological mass violence*.

O' Malley, Holt and Holt (2022) similarly argue about the necessity of prevention efforts that are «strength-based and include education surrounding toxic masculinities and gender equality» (p. 21), which may

allow a healthier expression of anger and negative emotions, especially those linked to low self-esteem. The authors stress the importance of validation toward the emotions of these individuals while, at the same time, dismantling the discourses that position women as the cause of their problems: according to the scholars, such approaches are essential to «prevent or de-escalate radicalization» (p. 22). They also emphasize the importance of incorporating the so-called *digital literacy and critical consciousness* (Watts, Abdul-Adil and Pratt, 2002) into youth education – particularly young males – which includes critical media engagement and consumption, as this could help counteract the effect of misogynistic media and online content that reinforce gender inequality and normalize gender-based violence.

What has just been said points to the need for structural responses that address mental health, masculinity norms and social isolation in a coordinated way. Taken together, these authors reveal that exiting inceldom is not only possible but should be considered a necessary goal; in order to achieve this objective, it is necessary to move beyond demonizing discourses and toward a more nuanced understanding of the psychosocial factors at play. Preventing radicalization, in this context, means offering alternative spaces for expression, relational support, and identity negotiation – before loneliness hardens into hate. This implies validating the emotional reality of the communities' members while dismantling the ideological frames that promote violence.

Conclusion

A central theme across the literature is that incels communities' function simultaneously as support system and echo chambers: while they often provide a space for individuals to express feelings – mostly about perceived sexual and romantic rejection –, these same places can reinforce toxic narratives and gender-based resentment, especially when emotional vulnerability is redirected toward hatred and entitlement. The incel communities represent a microcosm of broader anxieties about gender and belonging in the digital age; the architecture of Web 2.0 platforms does not merely host these grievances, rather it amplifies them: technological affordance and social media are a breeding ground for what Ging

(2017) calls *aggrieved manhood*. In an hyperconnected yet emotionally fragmented world, the rise of online misogynist enclaves reminds us that technological progress, without ethical grounding, can entrench hierarchies in new forms.

Moreover, significant gaps remain. The overrepresentation of English-speaking, western context in current research suggests an urgent need to broaden the geographical and cultural scope of the analysis, exploring the incel communities in non-western digital environments. Besides this, engaging directly with current and former community members through qualitative methods, as Sugiura (2021) did, could help tracing pathways into, and out of, the inceldom – a challenging task, as these individuals are often suspicious towards researchers.

As highlighted by scholars such as O' Malley, Holt and Holt (2022), Hoffman, Ware and Shapiro (2020) and Sugiura (2021), preventive strategies should therefore address not only individual behavior but also broader systemic dynamics: the incel phenomenon is not merely an online curiosity or extremist fringe, it's a mirror held up to contemporary anxieties about gender, intimacy and belonging. Responding to it demands a politics of care as much as critique, a commitment to transforming both digital culture and offline structures, that drive these young people to seek their identity in places of exclusion.

In fact, this analysis has illustrated how the incel communities, far from being an isolated digital anomaly, is instead deeply embedded in wider socio-cultural narratives of gender, power, and technological affordance; their members' worldview is not only shaped by their specific experiences of rejection – even if these deeply affect them – but it's also shaped by broader cultural narratives about masculinity and success in contemporary society. This review has explored the complexity of the incel phenomenon, and the literature shows that inceldom cannot be reduced to a monolithic or static identity. Instead, it is a fluid and evolving condition shaped by digital environment, cultural narratives around masculinity, and broader societal structures. Incels, as shown by the review results, should also be understood as symptomatic of contemporary gender order: their narrative draws on – and exaggerate – widespread cultural assumption about male entitlement and women's negated agency. In this sense, the problem is not only the fringe nature of incel ideology, but the extent to which it reflects ideas already embedded within

mainstream culture. At its core, incel ideology is a mirror – distorted, yet revealing – of the societal contradiction about masculinity and sexuality, representing the contemporary *male distress*.

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Masculinity and power: discursive constructions of gender from the radical right to the manosphere
Natale Feo[1]

Constructing the masculine: hegemony and forms of domination

In order to reflect critically on the issues related to the manosphere, it is useful to return to the theoretical reflection on hegemonic masculinity, which organises the interpretative framework of its contemporary declinations. In the theoretical debate on masculinity, the concept of «hegemony» recalls, in its most pregnant meaning, a form of power that operates not through coercion, but through the internalisation of culturally dominant norms and values (Gramsci, 1975). In this perspective, «hegemonic masculinity» does not coincide with the use of force but manifests itself as a regime of meaning that permeates social representations of the masculine, conferring authority and legitimacy on it. However, a rigidly structural reading risks crystallising its contours, reducing the complexity of its declinations to a single, static model (Connell, 1995). Beasley (2008) has warned against such «conceptual slippages» through which there is a tendency to superimpose hegemonic masculinity on practical manifestations embodied by specific groups of men in positions of power. This approach ends up obscuring the relational dimension of gender and, consequently, reinforcing the inequalities it aims to analyse. In the context of the global North, hegemonic masculinity tends to be represented through attributes such as heterosexuality, aggression and the role of breadwinner, obscuring the historical and cultural transformations that highlight its constructed and changing character (Anderson, 2009).

In *Masculinities in the Making*, Messerschmidt (2016) proposes a theoretical extension that is useful in overcoming these rigidities, emphasis-

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ing that hegemonic masculinities must be read as a situated and layered construction that is articulated on local, regional and global levels. It is defined in relation to subordinate and marginal configurations of masculinity, maintaining a position of dominance through the discursive incorporation of culturally perceived superior qualities. In this sense, as Schippers (2007) notes, hegemonic masculinity does not simply coincide with institutional or economic power, but with the ability to shape the collective imagination, exercising a form of cultural leadership based on consensus. In the contemporary context, this hegemony is confronted with the transformations induced by the neo-liberal paradigm, which reshapes male identity in a hyper-performative, competitive and self-entrepreneurial sense. The masculine ideal is redefined through codes that exalt self-sufficiency, determination, rationality and individual success, transforming cultural traits into performance requirements. As Rosalind Gill (2017) argues, neo-liberalism produces governable subjectivities through the internalisation of individual responsibility, with profound effects on masculinity, which is precarious both symbolically and materially: the job crisis, the flexibilisation of the market and the dismantling of welfare call into question the traditional role of the breadwinner, fuelling feelings of frustration and reactionary nostalgia.

These responses find an expressive and organisational shore within the manosphere where a virilist and reactionary imaginary is articulated that does not blame the male crisis on systemic changes - economic and structural - but on gender and immigration policies. The figure of the «annihilated» man here becomes the symbolic effect of an alleged subversion of the patriarchal order by female emancipation. In this narrative, the recourse to merit and individual responsibility – ideological legacies of neo-liberalism – serves to naturalise inequalities, tracing them back to supposed personal or moral failings. The intersection of meritocratic rhetoric and masculine claims thus consolidates the hegemony of the dominant model, denying the relational dimension of gender and reiterating pre-existing hierarchies (Messner, 1997). Neoliberalism, under the guise of pluralist inclusiveness (Moini, 2020), actually acts as a regulatory device that recognises only those subjectivities that perform in line with the dominant paradigm. Within this framework, even «non-hegemonic» forms of masculinity are hegemonised, insofar as they define themselves according to internalised and culturally reinforced normative logics.

Political masculinity and populism

While neo-liberal practices shape expectations of the masculine, they also provide fertile ground for the rise of political personalities representing a new masculine imaginary, the mainstay of reflection on right-wing populism. Politics is often represented as a practice devoid of gender connotations. However, masculinity acts as an implicit norm that profoundly structures and orients political action. Indeed, since the 1990s, a steadily growing literature in the field of masculinity studies – and particularly on masculinity in politics – has challenged the idea that politics is gender-neutral, making it clear that masculinity itself constitutes a political form (Connell, 2000). In the context of right-wing populism, however, masculinity is not the subject of critical reflection; on the contrary, figures such as Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin explicitly valorise the link between male identity and political power (Boatright and Sperling, 2019). Current declinations of radical right-wing populism are characterised by an explicit opposition to feminism and gender equality policies, in an attempt to reassert the role of the traditional family and promote a model of masculine and authoritarian leadership. Nevertheless, this apparent «gender traditionalism» is partially contradicted by the presence of women leaders within populist movements and the use of European values of gender equality as rhetorical tools of political legitimization (Ivi, para 2).

Populism: interpretative categories and conceptual ambiguities

Populism presents itself as a complex and analytically elusive concept. In Europe it is frequently associated with the radical right, whereas in the United States there is a tradition of progressive populism, a combination that would be almost contradictory in the European context (Müller, 2016; Diletti and Mongiardo 2022). Populism has also found expression in left-wing formations, especially in Latin America and southern European countries (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015). Its social base can vary, ranging from rural to urban settings, and its ideological orientation can focus as much on state intervention as on a neo-liberal vision of the market. Populist parties can play the role of opponents or, on the contra-

ry, be forces of government, aiming to mobilise consensus or dismantle existing structures.

Given its heterogeneity, the term «populism» is employed by scholars with different approaches to describe phenomena that often do not coincide. In Latin America, for example, the focus is mainly on economic and organisational dimensions, while in the European sphere the analysis of ideological and political aspects is favoured (Anselmi, 2018). Against this variety, the only shared element is the use of the idea of a people as opposed to an elite (Brubaker, 2017). However, the notion of «people» itself remains ambiguous, oscillating between different meanings: people as common people, as a sovereign subject or as a collectivity defined by cultural and ethnic traits. In this sense, the concept of people is configured as an empty vessel (Laclau and Mouffe,2014), susceptible to being filled with different meanings depending on the historical, political and cultural context. Much of the literature agrees that one of the fundamental elements of populist discourse is the self-perception of populists as the only authentic interpreters of the democratic will (Urbinati, 2019). Added to this is the belief that the current political system is incapable of truly representing the demands of the people (Otjes and Louwerse, 2015). Consequently, in populism the notion of «people» does not coincide with that of citizenship but rather refers to an idealized representation of a pure and morally superior community (Taggart, 2004). These characteristics are consistent with the definition of populism as a «thin ideology», which divides society into two opposite and homogeneous blocks: on the one hand the virtuous people, on the other the corrupt elite (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2015). If one considers populism as a phenomenon that is not autonomous, but dependent on a host ideology, it can be understood as a political form or style, capable of conveying discourses and messages (Löffler, Luyt and Starck, 2020).

Gender in populism discourse

A significant amount of recent research exploring the intersection between gender and populism has focused on the analysis of women's representation in populist parties, particularly the role assumed by wom-

en in leadership positions (Saccà and Massidda, 2021). Other strands of investigation have instead privileged the study of gender-differentiated electoral behaviour in right-wing populist contexts, as well as gender-conservative policies, such as the defence of the traditional family (Akkerman, 2015). With regard to the presence of female leaders in populist parties of both left- and right-wing orientation, a geographical and ideological divergence emerges - starting with the studies of Amesberger and Halbmayr (2002): if in Northern Europe, right-wing populist parties record a low effectiveness in valuing women's leadership (Cammarota and Meo, 2021; Diletti, 2022), in Eastern Europe contexts, left-wing populist parties seem instead to be more receptive, assuming progressive postures that, however, do not necessarily derive from an effective centrality of women in the decision-making process (Norocel, 2018).

The cult of personality that accompanies many populist figures reinforces a political performativity marked in a masculine sense. Regardless of ideological orientation, the populist leader often embodies the model of the «strong male»: assertive, sometimes aggressive, action-oriented. Even with seemingly gender-neutral policies, the construction of the public image occurs in masculine and authoritarian terms, supported by a simplified, anti-intellectual and often vulgar communicative style. In this context, the presence of women at the top of populist parties - such as Eva Perón, Marine Le Pen, Alice Weidel or Pia Kjærsgaard - challenges the idea of masculinity as an essential trait of populist leadership, showing how it can also be performed by female subjectivities in highly masculinized contexts. In relation to the link between gender and electoral behavior, right-wing populist parties oppose both gender equality and migration flows, identifying Islam as a threat to European ethno-cultural identity (Mostov, 2021). Election data reveal a clear gender gap: men are more likely than women to support parties opposed to immigration and to question the binary order and the traditional family, fueling the dichotomy between «female tolerance» and «male intolerance» (Zaslove, 2015). However, the existence of minorities such as «Gays for Trump» or «Alternative Homosexuals» highlights more articulated identity configurations within these alignments. Finally, a further ambivalence is noted: some right-wing populist parties display a discursive coexistence of apparently contradictory elements. On the one hand, they advocate strongly conservative rhetoric on family and gender roles; on the other,

they adopt «liberal» arguments in the field of migration, especially when cultural otherness is associated with oppression of women or sexual minorities. This dichotomy, far from coincidental, reflects strategic shifts in populist discourse, functional in constructing an «other» against which to define an idealised popular identity (Puar, 2017). In this sense, claims for gender equality are frequently portrayed as the expression of an elite distant from the «people», while the latter is represented as founded on the centrality of the traditional marital family, conceived as a fundamental pillar of the social order (Kreisky, 2014).

Masculinity in polical spheres: between gender and power

The notion of political masculinity emerges as an analytical category capable of bringing out the connections between male gender and the production of power. Although not yet well established in the scholarly literature, the concept lies in an area of intersection between political science and Critical Studies on Men and Masculinities (CSMM), calling for a transdisciplinary approach that holds together symbolic representations, leadership performances and legitimation processes. The politicalness of masculinity has been problematized since the 1970s, especially through post-structuralist feminist thought, which broadened the very definition of the political to include everyday practices and diffuse dimensions of power. In this framework, masculinity is not a natural given, but a relational construction implicated in relations of domination. Two questions guide the reflection: how to conceptualize political masculinity in a theoretically sound manner and what are its limits and analytical potential? The concept can refer either to masculine forms that manifest themselves directly in political contexts, or to the inherent politicalness of any masculine configuration as it is articulated around relations of power and subjectification. The position adopted here considers masculinity as a social product performed in political contexts, while paying attention to the risks of over-generalization (Hearn, 2004). Starck (2016) proposes that the category should be understood as encompassing all forms of masculinity constructed in the political field, whether embodied by institutional figures or those active in widespread

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participation. It is, therefore, an operational and situated concept, to be declined according to specific contexts.

A relevant line of research concerns radical right-wing leaders – such as Trump, Erdoğan or Bolsonaro – who mobilize hyper-virile traits to build authority and consensus. However, more recent studies have also shown less rigid forms of political masculinity, characterized by technocratic, pragmatic or emotional elements, as in pandemic management (Dursun *et al.*, 2021). A further plane of analysis concerns the symbolic relationship between leaders and supporters, in which male figures serve as models for the renegotiation of gender identity in polarized social contexts (Ozbay and Soybakis, 2020). Despite the growing interest, the theoretical use of the category remains discontinuous. Often employed descriptively, the notion also struggles to stabilize due to its semantic ambiguity. Reference to Connell (1995) and his typologies has offered relevant analytical tools, but has in turn generated questions about conceptual coherence (Hearn, 1996; Clatterbaugh, 2018). For a more effective use, it is useful to distinguish between power and politics: the former also manifests itself in invisible and naturalized forms; the latter, broadly understood, encompasses practices, representations and processes of subjectification (Lukes, 2012). From this perspective, masculinity can be read as a vehicle of power, an object of regulation and a terrain of contestation (Sawicki, 1994). The concept of «political masculinity» is thus configured as a useful critical lens to investigate the articulations between gender and authority, avoiding essentialist approaches (Ivi, para 2). In dominant configurations - so-called «malestream politics» (Ross. 2003) - masculinity is embodied in idealized figures such as the «strong man», the charismatic patriot or the technocrat, who convey virile models of leadership (Ben-Ghiat, 2020). Alongside these hegemonic images, more fluid or hybrid declinations of political masculinity also emerge - as in the case of Trump, whose leadership combines authoritarianism and ambiguous traits (Messerschmidt and Bridges, 2019). Moreover, non-institutional actors also contribute to shaping forms of political masculinity: activists engaged in anti-sexist, queer or ecological movements participate in identity renegotiation processes (Messner and Rosenfeld 1997). Political space cuts across all social spheres, and masculinity plays a central role there, even in progressive contexts where patriarchal dynamics persist (Nicholas and Agius, 2017). It also manifests itself in informal and dig-

ital spaces, contributing to the production of authority and legitimacy. The concept of political masculinity allows us to critically interrogate the intertwining of gender and power, inside and outside institutions (Starck and Luyt, 2019).

Populism and the restoration of masculinity

In recent years, support for right-wing populist parties has frequently been associated with segments of the population who perceive themselves as suffering from the processes of economic globalization and social transformation (Steenvoorden and Harteveld, 2018; Zagórski *et al.*, 2021). In particular, it is highlighted that those who experience precarious economic conditions or possess lower levels of education tend to identify with political discourses that promise protection, redemption and social recognition (Millar, 2017). According to Markovits (2019), this dynamic could also be read as a reaction to the rhetoric of merit, experienced by some as a blaming narrative that shifts the responsibility for their own systemic «failures» onto individuals. However, this explanation is not exhaustive. Some national cases show how support for right-wing populism can also come from middle or upper-middle social groups, as in the case of the VOX party in Spain, whose electorate includes a significant share of individuals with stable or high incomes (Rama *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, although the youth electorate is often attracted by progressive or environmentalist parties, VOX has been able to intercept a significant part of this segment as well (Manucci, 2021).

Perhaps even more significantly, the party shows a strongly male electoral composition: around two-thirds of its supporters are men. This marked masculinization of the vote suggests that economic and cultural categories are not enough to explain the appeal of right-wing populism. It is necessary to introduce a gender analysis, capable of highlighting how some political narratives are built around a nostalgic and reactionary view of masculine roles (Mudde, 2007). According to Gidron and Hall (2017), individuals who perceive a deterioration in their socioeconomic status are particularly receptive to those political messages that promise to restore value to the group to which they belong, both in material and symbolic terms. From this perspective, appeals to a traditional or he-

gemonic masculinity function as mobilizing tools: they not only speak to men, but also provide them with a language to express a sense of loss or marginalization. The literature has therefore begun to question the «gender gap» in voting for the populist right, identifying two main lines of interpretation. The first relates male support to unfavorable socio-economic conditions: men, who are over-represented in the production sectors most exposed to the crisis or technological substitution, suffer more from the effects of global economic transformation (Harteveld *et al.*, 2015). The second, on the other hand, emphasizes the influence of gender socialization: men would be more likely to identify with political narratives that enhance typically masculine traits such as aggressiveness, assertiveness and leadership (Viviani, 2017). This also includes the «cultural reaction» described by Norris and Inglehart (2019), according to which a part of the male electorate interprets advances in gender equality as a symbolic loss, a threat to the traditional hierarchical order.

Constructing the masculine in the discourse of right wing populism

Although there is no universally agreed definition of populism, the view developed by Ernesto Laclau (2005) is particularly useful in this context: populism is a discursive strategy that constructs a collective identity - the «people» - in opposition to an elite perceived as distant or corrupt. This identity construction is extremely flexible and can include cultural, symbolic and even sexual meanings. This is where masculinity comes into play as a discursive device, capable of reinforcing a sense of belonging and providing a symbolic representation of the virile, strong, protective «real people» (Ivi, para 2). In this sense, populism is not only a political content, but also a style, as Moffitt and Tormey (2014) point out, and populist style also manifests itself in gendered performance: the postures, language, and aesthetics adopted by leaders such as Matteo Salvini (Meo and Tramontana, 2025), Donald Trump, or Santiago Abascal embody a spectacularized version of masculinity, which blends physical strength, decision-making, and hostility towards «political correctness».

Interestingly, left-wing populisms in some cases adopt a more inclusive or egalitarian masculinity (Campbell and Erzeel, 2018), promoting gender politics and more fluid representations of male identity. Recent

research (Pease, 2019; Homolar and Löfflmann, 2022) has shown that right-wing populist rhetoric instrumentalises the gender issue to activate a collective masculine resentment, which feeds on personal frustrations and the desire for reassertion. In particular, we highlight the use of «humiliation» as a discursive device, capable of generating a shared, polarising and politically mobilising emotion (Homolar and Löfflmann, 2021). The theory of hegemonic masculinity, proposed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), is central to understanding this phenomenon: even if it is not the most widespread, this form of masculinity represents the cultural standard to which all men are implicitly expected to conform. It functions as a normative regime that positions men within a gender hierarchy and pushes them to perform according to dominant codes. As Kimmel (2017) suggests, male crises often occur precisely when these codes become unattainable. Already in the late 19th century, in the United States, a link was observed between populism and nostalgia for a virile ideal of the «self-made man».

Today, that «masculine capital» of which Ravenhill and De Visser (2017) speak - understood as symbolic power derived from adherence to the traits of dominant masculinity - can also be (re)conquered through voting. Thus, supporting right-wing populist parties can become not only a political act, but also a performative gesture: a way to reoccupy a symbolic space, reassert a status and defend a gender identity perceived to be under siege.

Populist partitical forms and gender (dis)equality

Over the last few decades, and particularly since the late 1990s, the working classes have progressively developed a growing distance from the political system, which once seemed more accessible and inclusive. Today, these social groups express a strong disaffection with representative institutions, perceived as incapable of responding to their needs and, indeed, responsible for their social and cultural marginalisation. This feeling of exclusion, in addition to weakening links with traditional forms of democratic participation, encourages an openness towards populist messages, often characterised by oppositional and anti-system tones (Gidron and Hall, 2017). In this sense, the various economic and political

crises that have affected Europe have acted as catalysts in the rise of new political actors, particularly populist movements of a radical nature (Kriesi, 2014), which appeal to popular discontent by presenting themselves as a clear alternative to the «system».

In this context, the link between populism and gender issues takes on an analytical perspective that takes into account the complexity and multidimensionality of the phenomenon. The heterogeneous nature of populisms makes it necessary to adopt an articulated approach that allows for the exploration of different levels of interaction between gender instances and populist rhetoric. These include at least four lines of investigation: the participation and political representation of women in populist parties; the analysis of electoral behaviour related to the gender gap; the public policies proposed on gender rights and equality; and finally, the presence - or absence - of gender narratives within the political communication of populist leaders (Sjöstedt, Nygren and Fotaki, 2021). A significant contribution in this regard is offered by Roth and Baird (2017), who propose to conceptualise the «feminisation of politics» through three interconnected dimensions: on the one hand, the need to achieve effective equality in the mechanisms of representation and participation; on the other, the formulation of policies capable of questioning the gender hierarchies and reproductive structures of heteronormative patriarchy; and finally, the promotion of alternative political styles that depart from the symbolic and cultural codes of the patriarchal tradition. This theoretical framework appears particularly useful for reflecting on the ambivalences and contradictions that emerge when populist rhetoric is confronted with egalitarian and feminist demands.

Right-wing populism and gender hierarchies

Precisely in the light of such a perspective, it can be argued that populism - in its most widespread declination and especially in its radical right-wing forms - places itself in a structurally opposed position to the principles of gender equality. This is evident in the rhetoric that accompanies the invocation of the «people», an apparently universal subject but which, in fact, is built on identity bases that reproduce patriarchal models

and exclusionary symbolic systems. The result is a process of marginalisation of female and queer subjectivities, which translates into an explicit denial of those ways of doing politics that are based on practices of care, inclusion and deconstruction of gender roles. Right-wing populisms in Europe are characterised by a regressive and anti-egalitarian framework, often expressed through language that is openly anti-feminist, hostile to LGBTQIA+ rights and steeped in Islamophobia. In these narratives, subjectivities that do not conform to the heterosexual and patriarchal order are represented as a threat to social cohesion and excluded from the space of full citizenship. The traditional family - understood as the fundamental cell of society - thus becomes the cornerstone of a political project that feeds on exclusion and normativity. In this framework, the «defence of the family» is never neutral, but takes the form of a strategy to legitimise the subordination of women and gender minorities. The case of the British *UKIP*, led by Nigel Farage, is an emblematic example of this dynamic: the party has integrated militant anti-feminism, condemnation of unconventional families and explicit hostility to Islam into its platform, mobilising cultural fears and identity anxieties to strengthen its electoral base (Gallo e Scrinzi, 2016). Similar trends can be seen in other European contexts - including Italy and France - where right-wing populist parties have displayed similar strategies. Scrinzi's (2014) ethnographic research, for example, compares the political participation of men and women in the *Lega* and the *Rassemblement National* highlighting how these parties convey naturalising representations of gender difference and cultural otherness, functional to their identity rhetoric. Radical right-wing populism, therefore, does not merely exclude, but often actively reworks the gender hierarchy as part of its ideological project: the systematic use of sexist and misogynist language, the rhetoric of the virile leader, nostalgia for a traditional family order and fierce criticism of feminism are part of a regressive logic that aims to restore the centrality of the heterosexual male in the public space. However, a particularly interesting - and at the same time contradictory - dimension concerns the presence of female figures in the apex roles of some of these parties: female leaders who, while apparently challenging patriarchal codes, reinforce their assumptions through a rhetoric that combines emancipation and sovereignty (Snipes and Mudde, 2020). This is an instrumental use of gender equality that masks a deeply conservative and hierarchical vi-

sion (Loffler, Luyt and Starck, 2020). Starting from this tension, Loffler suggests - taking up Bourdieu's and Connell's categories - that populist leaders operate a reversal of the dominant political habitus, manipulating the boundaries between what is considered legitimate and what is not, also in relation to gender issues. Thus, while reproducing a patriarchal symbolic structure, these actors manage to disguise it behind an apparent break with the past, in reality reinforcing the logic of exclusion on which their discourse is based.

Not all populisms, however, move in the same direction. Some parties, such as *Podemos* in Spain, which originated within progressive social movements (in this case the Indignados), have tried to build an alternative political proposal that focuses on internal democratisation, gender equality and horizontal participation. From its origins, Podemos declared its intention to feminise politics, breaking away from top-down and hypermasculine models and proposing a form of collective and dialogic leadership. Its relationship with academic knowledge also runs counter to the populist tradition: while many populist leaders, such as Trump or Milei, are characterised by an aggressive anti-intellectualism, Podemos has integrated numerous scholars and scholars into its political project, asserting that an educated and informed politics is an essential prerequisite for the democratic transformation of society. In this sense, the combination of populist rhetoric and academic language is configured as a strategy of «cultural re-literacy», aimed at reconstructing a critical citizenship (Kantola and Lombardo, 2019).

The manosphere as a metapolitic laboratory of contemporary masculinity

If right-wing populist rhetorics have reactivated normative models of masculinity linked to the restoration of the patriarchal order, as extensively analysed by Farci (2024), it is in digital spaces that, through devious and apparently insufficient forms of platform fruition, these visions hybridise and redefine new codes of re-appropriation of the masculine symbolic dimension. Resentment and loss of status find online a new lifeblood for the structure of a laboratory of identity re-elaboration. It is precisely in this liminal space, between reactionary nostalgia and reinven-

tion of the masculine, that the figure of the manfluencer imposes itself as a metapolitical agent of contemporary masculinity (Renström and Bäck, 2024).

Indeed, with the massive spread of the internet since the 1990s, modes of political participation have been profoundly transformed, shifting towards more fluid, interstitial and often non-institutional forms. The category of «sub-activism» (Bakardjieva, 2009; Mudde, 2020) captures this transition: political engagement becomes intermittent, individualised and intertwined with the everyday practices of digital existence. In this context, the figure of the political influencer asserts itself: initially coming from non-ideological spheres such as gaming, he or she subsequently becomes a producer of content capable of conveying worldviews, building consensus and orienting public debate. Influencers who venture into the political field do not generally do so through explicit militancy, but rather through a politicisation of personal experiences - often marked by discomfort or marginalisation - that are narrated in a collective key. In this sense, their intervention does not end in opinion, but contributes to the production of meaning and the legitimisation of ideological frames, according to a logic that approaches metapolitics (Goodwin, Joseff, Riedl, Lukito and Woolley 2023).

The term «metapolitics», introduced by the French Nouvelle Droite and reworked by Alain de Benoist (2024), refers to a cultural action aimed at transforming common sense even before the structures of political power. It aims at shaping the symbolic horizon within which political hegemony is made possible, acting as a precondition for any lasting institutional change. Today, with the advent of digital platforms, metapolitics has reconfigured itself in a decentralised form, thanks to the possibility of disseminating ideological messages through apparently «non-political» but profoundly normative content (Maly, 2023). It is within this framework that we find the *manfluencers*, central figures of the so-called manosphere: a heterogeneous digital ecosystem, animated by subjects who identify with a more or less explicit critique of feminism, gender equality and the transformation of sexual roles. The manosphere

comprises a plurality of subcultures (from MRAs[2] to Incels[3], from PUAs[4] to «alphas»and «sigma males»[5]), which despite their differentiation converge in the production of a reactive masculinity, based on victimhood, resentment and the reactivation of traditional hierarchies. What unites them is not so much a common political agenda as the sharing of a symbolic horizon that justifies and normalises male supremacy (Ging, 2017).

Manfluencers operate as discursive agents, capable of transforming contemporary male anxiety into an ordered, performative narrative. They promote models such as that of the «sigma male» - a self-sufficient, competitive man, marginal to the masses but successful in the market of relationships and labour - that reformulate the codes of male hegemony in a neo-liberal key. In this sense, masculinity is not only celebrated as a natural identity, but is constantly performed as symbolic capital to be accumulated: self-improvement, discipline, sexual domination and emotional indifference are configured as skills to be acquired, according to an entrepreneurial logic of the self (Farci, 2024).

This device rests on a therapeutic rhetoric that assumes an ambivalent function: on the one hand it offers itself as a space for listening to and recognising male malaise, on the other hand it channels this malaise towards forms of reactionary politicisation. The self-narrative of personal failure thus becomes the access point to a community of meaning that legitimises anger and restores it as pride of identity (Marwick and Caplan, 2018). It is here that the manosphere reveals itself to be a metapolitical device: it does not aim to change institutions, but to transform common culture, reorienting the meanings of terms such as «freedom», «justice» or «merit» within a hypermasculine and ultra-competitive framework (Harvey and Mateos 2007). In this perspective, the relationship between

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2. MRAs (Men's Rights Activists): groups that claim to represent the interests of men, often arguing that men are victims of society or dominant feminism.

3. Incels (Involuntary Celibates): online communities of men who say they are involuntarily deprived of sexual or romantic relationships, blaming women, other men or society, and often develop misogynistic or resentful narratives.

4. PUAs (PickUp Artists): men who promote techniques and strategies to seduce women, often treating them as objects to be conquered, and reinforcing norms of male dominance in relationships.

5. «Alphas», «Betas», «Sigmas»: hierarchical terminology used in the Manosphere to classify men based on presumed sexuality, relational success and dominance. For example, «alphas» are considered dominant and attractive men; «betas» men seen as subordinate or less «masculine»; «sigmas» men who, though equivalent to alphas, operate outside the traditional hierarchy, like «lone wolves» (Ribeiro, Blackburn, Bradlyn, De Cristofaro, Stringhini, Long and Zannettou, 2021).

manosphere, populism and neoliberalism is not accidental, but structural. The construction of a «masculine people» as opposed to feminist elites, emancipated women or progressive institutions traces the mechanism of right-wing populism, based on the binary opposition between a pure «us» and a corrupt or privileged «them». At the same time, the emphasis on individual autonomy, personal responsibility and efficiency fits perfectly with neo-liberal rationality, which turns subjects into moral entrepreneurs of themselves. The masculinity that emerges from these discourses is thus the hybrid product of two logics: the populist one, which seeks enemies and simplifies conflicts; and the neoliberal one, which internalises competition as destiny and vulnerability as guilt. Ultimately, the manosphere can be read as a discursive laboratory in which symbolic forms of patriarchal restoration are elaborated through cultural and affective strategies. Its strength lies not in ideological coherence, but in its ability to intercept a need for meaning, offering quick answers to complex existential questions. It is precisely this ability to combine culture, affections and worldviews that makes it one of the most relevant spaces for the critical analysis of contemporary male subjectivity.

In view of what has been described so far, it is possible to affirm, on the one hand, the fecundity and proliferation of exclusionary narratives that convey digital spaces, and on the other hand, it is possible to verify how, in a subtle and underhand manner, through the practices of subactivism, young people and adolescents who feel marginalised, do not reflect the law of LSM (look, money, status) - coined within the manosphere itself - and see in female emancipation the erosion of male privilege. Obviously, this is a totally distorted view of reality, the illusion of having a pre-eminent role in contemporary society is the result of a cultural distortion, such as patriarchy, which, over the years has done nothing but complicate the relational status between the two sexes, making women the subjects of an asymmetrical process (Van Valkenburgh, 2018). Through this contribution, we intend to restore a new perspective of what are the geometries of contemporary power and, by presenting the existing «subterranean» dimension of the creation of new masculine codes, we want to make it evident and bring out its criticalities, opening up new perspectives for an inclusive and democratically participatory society.

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What does that have to do with anything? Abortion and competitive framing processes
Giulia Agolino[1]

Introduction

This contribution approaches abortion as an issue of power and op-pression from a communicative perspective. In particular, it addresses the competitive framing processes in the context of the debate on the topic, by focusing on abortion frames and framing strategies employed in movement-countermovement dynamics (McCaffrey and Keys, 2000). Emphasis is placed on frames and framing because they are powerful stra-tegic tools for imposing certain points of view and reproducing abortion stigma, as well as weapons of resistance.

After outlining the theoretical framework by drawing on the liter-ature on framing, that on the representation of abortion and that on social movement framing processes, the paper analyzes three posters by the Italian anti-choice association Pro Vita & Famiglia. They have been chosen because they all address abortion by referring to other issues, such as environment, migration, disability and gender violence.

We intend to explore the strategic meaning of this choice and its im-plications, trying to answer the following interwoven questions: how is the abortion issue framed? What framing strategies are employed by Pro Vita & Famiglia? Who are the posters targeted to?

In order to give an answer, a qualitative content analysis is carried out, both verbal and visual, by using some interpretative models drawn from the literature mentioned above. In addition, some semiotic models are

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employed to better understand the communication strategy behind the three posters.

As reflected in the choice to label Pro Vita & Famiglia as an *anti-choice* organisation rather than a *pro-life* organisation, this study does not conceal the pro-choice perspective from which it was carried out, in the belief that researchers cannot be truly neutral and that the *language of choice* (Statham and Ringrow, 2022) is necessary to critically address abortion as an issue of power and inequalities.

Abortion, stigma and power

Abortion is one of the most divisive and debated moral issues and it has been defined as the «clash of absolutes» (Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022). Its contentious nature can be explained by considering that abortion relates to deeply intimate dimensions and experiences of human beings involving at the same time questions of birth, death and sex (Atikcan and Hand, 2024). This makes abortion a site where the operation of social forces, including power, can be observed very clearly (Kimport and Weitz, 2024). Indeed, abortion is a topic relevant to many issues such as gender, sexuality, race, migration, class, inequality, health, religion and so on, and it tells a great deal about the nature and state of health of democracy as a whole (Ferree *et al.*, 2002, p. 4).

Power disparities and inequalities underlie abortion stigma, which is «perpetuated by systems of unequal access to power and resources, narrow and rigid gender roles and systematic attempts to control female sexuality» (Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell, 2009, p. 4)[2], which have both global and local dimensions (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019). Abortion stigma can be considered a «compound stigma» because «it builds on other forms of discrimination and structural injustices» (ivi, p. 10). In this regard, Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) argue:

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2. As pointed out by Link and Phelan (2001), «stigmatisation is entirely contingent on access to social, economic and political power that allows the identification of differentness, the construction of stereotypes, the separation of labelled persons into distinct categories and the full execution of disapproval, rejection, exclusion and discrimination» (p. 367).

Marginalised and disadvantaged women are in the main subjected to societal stigmatisation, which is exacerbated when they seek abortion care. Stigmatisation of abortion builds on these forms of inequality, while at the same time using them to maintain abortion stigma. This strategy has important implications for the (lack of) access to reproductive health care that disproportionally affects the most marginalised, including the poor, ethnic, racial minorities and migrants (p. 8).

According to Kumar, Hessini and Mitchell (2009), abortion is stigmatized because it contravenes female ideals of sexuality and motherhood: female sexuality solely for procreation, inevitability of motherhood and instinctual nurturance of the vulnerable. In addition to these, Norris, Bessett, Steinberg, Kavanaugh, De Zordo and Becker (2011) identified other four reasons behind abortion stigma: attributing personhood to the fetus, legal restrictions, the idea that abortion is dirty or unhealthy, and the use of stigma as a tool for anti-abortion efforts[3].

Abortion stigma is created and manifests across all levels of human interactions: between individuals, in community, in institutions, in law and government structure and in framing discourses (Norris *et al.*, 2011; Kumar, Hessini, and Mitchell, 2009). In this paper we focus on frames and framing strategies employed by social movements dealing with abortion, in particular in movement-countermovement dynamics.

Frames

As pointed out by Entnam (1993), «to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation» (p. 52). An issue frame, more or less implicitly or explicitly, suggests what is essential, the causes, consequences and values in play (Ryan and Gamson, 2015). Subsequently, frame analysis is aimed at examining the selection

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3. As pointed out by Kumar, Hessini and Mitchell (2009), abortion stigma is not a universal social fact, but «a social phenomenon that is constructed and reproduced locally through various pathways» (p. 4). Its expression and meaning are context specific and «it is entirely possible that there are situations in which abortion stigma does not exist, is minimal or is less stigmatised than another condition» (Ivi, p. 3).

and salience of certain aspects of an issue by exploring images, texts, the language used, the methaphors employed etc. in an attempt to convey a message (Maguire and Murphy, 2023, p. 5). The techniques used for this purpose include qualitative content analysis, semiotics and narrative analysis (Maguire and Murphy, 2023).

Frames are powerful strategic tools used by political actors to make people think about an issue in a particular way (Moyer, 2021). However, not all frames are equally effective in influencing public opinion. As pointed out by Atikcan and Hand (2024), when a frame comes from credible sources and appeals to cultural values, it is more effective. Besides, we need to take into account that we have multiple frames about an issue in our heads and «a specific frame may be much more easily triggered and habitually used, but others are also part of our cultural heritage and can be triggered and used as well, given the appropriate cues» (Ryan and Gamson, 2015, p. 138).

Focusing on frames and framing strategies is crucial to understand the power dynamcis underlying abortion debate and regulation (Calkin, Freeman, and Moore, 2022). By examining abortion frames, we can explore the roots of stigmatisation and discrimination. However, frames are not just tools for imposing certain points of view on reality and society, but also weapons for resisting.

Abortion frames

The extant literature on the representation of abortion shows that abortion is and can be framed in many ways as «the inner logics of abortion narratives and discourses are temporally, culturally, and politically situated» (Maguire and Murphy, 2023, p. 2). Subsequently, abortion frames are an expression of the specific cases under study. However, it is possible to observe the presence of some recurring frames or at least the presence of frames that are semantically close to each other. Therefore we can identify some fundamental nodes in the abortion debate.

In general, it is possible to distinguish between anti-choice and pro-choice frames or between stigmatising and non-stigmatising frames. However, it should be noted that in some cases, the same frame can be employed to advocate both for and against abortion. The communicative

outcome is contingent upon the manner and the context in which the frame is implemented. This is the case, for example, with the women's rights frame, with a focus on health and safety in the anti-choice perspective while bodily autonomy and self-determination in the pro-choice perspective (Mucciaroni, Ferraiolo, and Rubado, 2019; Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022).

As already pointed out, one of the recurring frames is the fetal personhood, according to which the fetus is an autonomous agent with inherent rights (Baird and Millar, 2018; Norris *et al.*, 2011; Rao *et al.*, 2025; Luker, 1984; Maguire and Murphy, 2023). Attributing personhood to the fetus leads to depicting abortion as a murder and women who get an abortion and providers as murderers.

Fetal images are used to erase pregnant women from view «decontextualizing the fetus and overstating its independence from the woman who carries it and the social circumstances of her life» (Norris *et al.*, 2011, p. 51). Thus the humanization of the fetus implies a simultaneous dehumanization of the gestating person (Silva *et al.*, 2025, p. 3), who is perceived merely as an incubator for new life (Maguire and Murphy, 2023). In this perspective, the right to life of a fetus is regarded as being of equal, if not greater, importance than the well-being of the pregnant person (Evans *et al.*, 2023, p. 11). Besides, the frame of fetal personhood is connected with the centrality of the topic of caring in the abortion debate. The question is who to care for between the woman and the fetus (Atikcan and Hand, 2024).

Sometimes, abortion is framed as a potential means of discrimination against sections of the population, e.g. people with Down Syndrome (Maguire and Murphy, 2023; Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Celis and Coene, 2016). Furthermore, it is possible to encounter populist narratives in which abortion is framed as a threat to the nation (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019).

Another recurring frame is the one that portrays abortion as something that hurts women (Baird and Millar, 2018; Norris *et al.*, 2011). The harmful nature of abortion is associated with both physical and psychological dimensions (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Moyer, 2021; Bruce, Hutchens and Cowan, 2024). Some anti-abortionists frame abortion as unsafe and dangerous to women's health, even referring to unsubstantiated links between abortion, breast cancer and reduced fertility (Norris

et al., 2011; Moyer, 2021). There is also talk of the psychological effects of abortion, the so-called post-abortion syndrome (Norris *et al.*, 2011).

This frame is functional to a women-centered anti-abortion strategy, by positioning women as victims and objects of pity who need to be protected and abortion providers as cruel and callous manipulators harming both fetus and women, who are like «damaged goods» (Norris *et al.*, 2011, p. 52). This frame is imbued with gendered stereotypes of vulnerable women and, as a consequence, it leads to a paternalistic approach (Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022).

If within this frame it's the experience of having an abortion to flaw women, in other contexts abortion reveals flaws in women's character (Norris *et al.*, 2011). Women who get an abortion are depicted as deviant, selfish, immoral, irresponsible, promiscuous, unfeminine, depressed (Baird and Millar, 2018; Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Bruce, Hutchens, and Cowan, 2024). In this perspective, if women are not passive and vulnerable victims to protect, but autonomous and agentic beings, they are stigmatized (Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022).

As the women's rights frame, the women's health/safety frame is employed to support positions both for and against abortion. The supporters of pro-choice positions stress the risks associated with illegal abortion practices (Maguire and Murphy, 2023) and the negative effects of unintended pregnancy. In this perspective, women requesting an abortion exercise their right to healthcare (Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022).

Furthermore, we need to take into account that the health/safety frame can be used by the supporters of both anti-choice and pro-choice positions to take the focus off morality and to have a broad, intersectional appeal (Maguire and Murphy, 2023; Vossen, Pooter, and Meier, 2022). This can be explained by referring to the linkage between the women's health frame and the science frame. Framing an issue in scientific terms is a way to demonstrate credibility, «to elevate and insulate claims, by asserting that they are based on neutral and objective evidence, are unaffected by political forces (Ahmed 2015), or come from experts» (Moyer, 2021, p. 155).

We can consider other frames including the economic frame, whereby abortion is represented as an economically motivated decision (Bruce *et al.*, 2024), and the religious frame, whereby abortion is regarded as a sin (Rao *et al.*, 2025).

Those mentioned here are just some of the ways in which abortion is and can be framed. To deepen our understanding of how abortion is framed, we now intend to approach the abortion debate by focusing on movement-countermovement dynamics and how these translate into specific framing strategies. Shifting the focus to framing, we can address the dynamic and interactional nature of frames (Van Hulst and Yanow, 2014) and acknowledge that «frames develop through highly situated interactional processes of communication» (ivi, p. 95).

Social movements and framing strategies

Framing processes are of central importance for understanding the character and course of social movements (Benford and Snow, 2000). Movement actors can be regarded as «signifying agents actively engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning» (ivi, p. 613) in order «to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists» (Snow and Benford, 1988, p. 198). In order to achieve these objectives, social movements can use framing strategies appealing to people through reason, logic, emotion or all three (Maguire and Murphy, 2023).

With respect to strategic processes associated with social movement framing, Benford and Snow (2000) speak of *frame alignment processes* in order to identify the «strategic efforts by social movement organizations to link their interests and interpretive frames with those of prospective constituents and actual or prospective resource providers» (p. 624).

Four basic alignment processes have been identified: the first is *frame bridging*, which «refers to the linking of two or more ideologically congruent but structurally unconnected frames regarding a particular issue or problem» (*ibidem*); the second is *frame amplification*, which «involves the idealization, embellishment, clarification, or invigoration of existing values or beliefs» (*ibidem*); the third is *frame extension* which «entails depicting [a social movement organization's] interests and frame(s) as extending beyond its primary interests to include issues and concerns that are presumed to be of importance to potential adherents» (ivi, p. 625); the last is *frame transformation* which «refers to changing old understandings and meanings and/or generating new ones» (*ibidem*).

In order to explore these dynamics, we need to address an aspect of central importance: *cultural resonance* (Rohilinger, 2002; Maguire and Murphy, 2023; Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019; Benford and Snow, 2000). As pointed out by Cullen and Korolczuk (2019), «social movements do not construct frames in a vacuum, but rather in a cultural context that renders some ideas more legitimate, recognisable and sensible than others» (p. 9). So, in order to achieve their objectives, they tend to use frames which resonate with the targets they address to, by drawing on society's values and existing cultural narratives (Maguire and Murphy, 2023; Ferree, 2003).

For instance, Ferree (2003) conducted a comparative-historical analysis of abortion activism in the United States and Germany, showing the prevalence of liberal individualist frames in the former and protectionist frames in the latter. The feminist movements adopted these different frames depending on the political, ideological and cultural context in order to gain resonance and be more effective (thus securing allies, maintaining public support and demobilising countermovements).

According to Benford and Snow (2000), resonance is relevant to the effectiveness or mobilizing potency of proffered framings and variations in degree of frame resonance can be explained by referring to two sets of interacting factors: credibility of the proffered frame and its relative salience to targets of mobilization. The first is determined by three factors: frame consistency, empirical credibility and credibility of the frame articulators. The latter has three dimensions: centrality, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity.

The concept of cultural resonance hides power dynamics. As pointed out by Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) in relation to abortion, «cultural and social resonance may require a moderating and middle ground framing that captures public sentiment, speaks to deeper cultural constructions and ideologies, but may also marginalise the experiences of minority and/or marginalised women» (p. 9). Such framing strategies, which seek resonance, have political costs because they exclude the interests and needs which are marginalized by the hegemonic discourse in a particular context (Ferree, 2003).

For instance, Ferree's study mentioned above (2003) shows that American abortion-rights rhetoric marginalized «the women who are, and feel themselves to be, victimized by oppressive social conditions – including

not only poverty and racism but also parents, husbands, or boyfriends who pressure them into abortions they personally do not want» (p. 340), while the «middle ground» framing strategy (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019) adopted in West Germany led to rejecting the personal desire to say no to becoming a mother.

These findings are consistent with those of the research conducted by Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) on the mobilisation against the abortion ban in Poland in 2016 and *Repeal the 8th!* campaign in Ireland between 2016 and 2018. They argue that the generalising and empathetic frames employed by pro-choice movements in these contexts to seek resonance have exclusionary implications and raise doubts about their effectiveness in countering abortion stigma.

According to Ferree (2003), while alternative framing strategies may be ineffective in the short term, they may be «the only route to cultural transformations that delegitimate existing power relations» (p. 340). However, even more radical pro-choice positions, which don't seek resonance, run the risk of reproducing an exclusionary logic.

Baird and Millar (2018) stress the growing trend within abortion activism to represent abortion as a positive experience which is beneficial to women and is not to be justified. While the more moderate apologetic narrative requires women who have abortions to justify their actions to others and to express grief and sadness for their decisions, «the unapologetic narrative foregrounds the figure of the "unwillingly pregnant woman", for whom abortion provides a release from an involuntary and unwelcome condition, thus producing an overwhelming positive experience» (ivi, p. 1120). According to Baird and Millar, these positive and unapologetic narratives contribute to counter abortion stigma and to spread the idea that we can't distinguish between good and bad reasons for abortion (Norris *et al.*, 2011), but they may have exclusionary implications. They may marginalize the women for whom abortion represents a problematic experience.

Besides, overcoming sharp dichotomies, we should take into account and acknowledge that abortion may also be experienced as both positive and negative at the same time.

As pointed out by Cullen and Korolczuk (2019) «it is essential to open social and cultural space for many different experiences of abortion to exist as valid» (p. 16).

Movement-countermovement dynamics and competitive framing processes

The construction of meaning by social movements is a process characterized by adaptation and contentiousness (Moyer, 2021), which is influenced by structures of media, social events, bystanders and oppositional groups (Rohlinger, 2002). We focus on movement-countermovement dynamics, which reveal how «the mobilization of consensus does not occur in a vacuum» (McCaffrey and Keys, 2000, p. 46). Social movements often act in response to the narratives and positions adopted by their opponents (Moyer, 2021), that thus influence the framing strategies employed (Rohlinger, 2002). Therefore counterframing strategies are crucial to understand social movement framing activity.

Counterframing can be defined as the attempt «to rebut, undermine, or neutralize a person's or group's myths, versions of reality, or interpretive framework» (Benford, 1987, p. 75). The movement reacts to the counterframes of opponents trying to prevent, contain or reverse potential damages to its previous claims or attributes (Benford and Snow, 2000). These dynamics involving movements and their detractors have been referred to as *framing contests* (Ryan, 1991).

McCaffrey and Keys (2000) argue that frame alignment is a key element in understanding movement-countermovement dynamics because central to these is the competition for symbolic dominance, which is connected to larger mobilization processes. In order to explore how the presence and the activity of a countermovement influence the frame alignment processes adopted by a social movement organization, they conducted a study focused on the counterframing strategies employed by the New York National Organization for Women (NYSNOW) in response to the conservative countermovement around the abortion issue.

They have identified three counterframing strategies a social movement organization can employ to resist or counterattack the opponent: *polarization-vilification*, *frame saving* and *frame debunking*.

Polarization is a competitive framing strategy used to establish «a definitional dichotomy of "us versus them" or, alternatively, an exaggerated, black-and-white vision of events that justifies investment of resources» (McCaffrey and Keys, 2000, p. 44). It is closely related to *vilification*, which is a strategy consisting in framing the adversary «as corrupt, hyp-

ocritical, or a reprobate», while enabling the movement «to present itself as a moral agent fighting against evil» (*ibidem*).

Frame debunking is a competitive framing strategy aimed at undermining the resonance of rival claims and discrediting competing ideologies for the purpose of advancing the ideology of the movement. For instance, it can be undertaken by holding the claims of opponent groups for scrutiny and deconstruction and showing their inconsistency and hypocrisy. A second way of debunking claims is to use a member sharing an identification with an oppositional group in order to denounce its agenda and strategy and reveal their true character (ivi, p. 53).

Frame saving refers to the efforts of a social movement organization to preserve and restore credibility to a frame which has been challenged, for instance, through the careful selection of terminology.

The analysis of the three posters will show how power dynamics can be embedded in frames and framing strategies.

Research design

This paper intends to analyze three posters by the Italian anti-choice association Pro Vita & Famiglia, an organisation founded in 2019 which is committed to «building a society founded on the values of life and family, against the "culture of death"» and acting «for children, the natural family and the educational freedom of parents» (Pro Vita & Famiglia, n.d.).

The three posters have been chosen because they all address the abortion issue by referring to other issues, such as migration, disability, environment and gender violence. We intend to explore the strategic meaning of this choice and its implications, trying to answer the following interwoven questions: how is the abortion issue framed? What framing strategies are employed by Pro Vita & Famiglia? Who are the posters targeted to?

In order to give an answer, a qualitative content analysis is carried out, both verbal and visual, by employing interpretative models drawn from the literature mentioned above and from semiotics.

In particular, we intend to examine how the abortion issue is framed in the posters trying to observe whether one or more of the recurring abortion frames emerging from the literature are employed.

With regard to the framing strategies adopted in the posters, we intend to recognise whether Pro Vita & Famiglia employs one or more of the four frame alignment strategies identified by Benford and Snow (2000) and the three counterframing strategies outlined by McCaffrey and Keys (2000).

In order to enrich the interpretation, in relation to both the first and second questions, we will also use the *canonical narrative schema*, a model elaborated by the semiologist Algirdas Julien Greimas that allows for the analysis of the basic structure of narratives[4]. It includes different *actants* that correspond to different narrative functions[5]. This semiotic model is argued to be useful to better understand the communication strategy behind the three posters.

In relation to the third question, applying a semiotic perspective in this case as well, we intend to identify the *enunciatee* that emerges from the posters, i.e. the textual simulacrum of the addressee.

Furthermore, in order to contextualize and better analyze the three posters, we take into account the press releases that accompanied their distribution, as well as some posts on the social media pages of the association.

«Not one (woman) less... but for real!»: abortion and gender violence

In 2024, on the occasion of International Women's Day on 8 March, Pro Vita & Famiglia decided to send five trucks bearing the poster in figure 1 around the streets of Rome (mobile billboards). Against a pink background, the poster depicts a pregnant woman with her eyes turned on her belly, which is adorned with a pink bow. Next to the woman stand

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4. It is applicable not only to textual products that tell stories (e.g. novels, films), but also to other discursive genres, such as advertising. More details can be found in Marrone, 2007.

5. Actants are abstract entities identifiable at a deep level of the narrative.

the headline «Not one (woman) less…but for real!»[6] and the sub-headline «On the side of all women». Bottom right is the logo of the association.

Pro Vita & Famiglia spokesperson Maria Rachele Ruiu explained that the aim of this poster is to

> give voice to three women's rights ignored by official propaganda: the right to become mothers without giving up work and a decent salary, or to prefer motherhood to a career without feeling singled out; the right not to have an abortion due to socio-economic difficulties; the right to be born and not to be aborted, all the more so if only because they are women, as is still the case in many parts of the world in the deafening silence of the left (Pro Vita & Famiglia, March 7, 2024).

Figure 1. Source: Pro Vita & Famiglia, March 7, 2024

These words seem to suggest a women-centered anti-abortion strategy[7]. However, observing the poster, only the third right indicated seems

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6. All translations from Italian are my own unless indicated otherwise.

7. In particular, the second right mentioned implies the economic frame whereby abortion is represented as an economically motivated decision (Bruce *et al.*, 2024).

to have been taken into account: that of the fetus «to be born and not to be aborted».

The combination of visual and verbal components results in the use of the fetal personhood frame, which emerges, on the one hand, from the depiction of the pink bow on the belly and, on the other hand, from the inclusion of the fetus in the women's category («On the side of all women») and the representation of abortion as a form of gender-based violence.

Indeed, «Not one (woman) less» is a clear reference to the feminist movement *Ni una menos* that started in Argentina in 2015 to fight against gender-based violence and then spread internationally, including in Italy (*Non una di meno*). Feminists, in general, represent an opponent for Pro Vita & Famiglia, as demonstrated by the press release which accompanied the launch of the poster: «International Women's Day is not owned by the Democratic Party and feminists» (Pro Vita & Famiglia, March 7, 2024)[8].

Although the spokeswoman of the organisation openly contested the juxtaposition of the poster to femicides by Marta Bofanoni, a regional councillor in Lazio belonging to the Democratic Party, in 2023 Pro Vita & Famiglia used the same claim in a post published on its social media pages on the occasion of the International Day against Violence towards Women[9]. Besides, in 2021 on the same occasion the association posted an image of a fetus on its social media pages while affirming that abortion is the leading cause of femicide[10].

The words «…but for real!» suggests that Pro Vita & Famiglia is employing the frame debunking strategy in order to shed light on the alleged inconsistency of the positions of feminist movements on gender-based violence and abortion. This competitive framing strategy meets the dual

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8. Pro Vita & Famiglia accused Non una di meno of devastating the headquarters of the association during the demonstration against gender violence in Rome on 25 November 2023. Non una di meno described the action as a way to sanction Pro Vita & Famiglia as an expression of the anti-choice patriarchy; Non una di meno (2023, November 26), *La marea al Circo Massimo era strapipante e incontenibile*, Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/nonunadimeno.mantova/p/C0J5oqDIfsV/

9. Pro Vita & Famiglia (2023, November 25), *Nella giornata contro la #violenzasulledonne, di cui ultima vittima è #GiuliaCecchettin, è urgente indagare le cause della violenza dilagante in profondità*, Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/C0EO__xRLgk/

10. Pro Vita & Famiglia (2021, November 21), *L'ABORTO È LA PRIMA E PIÙ GRANDE #VIOLENZA CONTRO LE DONNE*, Instagram. https://www.instagram.com/p/CWskXr6t-Ka/

objective of galvanising supporters and undermining the credibility of the opponent.

In semiotics terms, this strategy can be regarded as an attempt at delegitimizing the opponent as a *Sender*[11] in order to challenge the values they promote. By presenting its opponents as an *Anti-sender*, Pro Vita & Famiglia tries to affirm its moral superiority.

However, it is not only a question of credibility. The *enunciator* (textual simulacrum of the addresser) who emerges from the poster is not only trying to be credible, but also emotionally engaging, by both the verbal and visual components of the poster.

Who is this poster targeted to? The press release that accompanied the launch of the poster does not specify this aspect, but the choice of mobile billboards suggests the will to reach a broad and diverse audience, also taking into account the media attention that such an edgy poster can attract. However, the reference to Non una di meno implies an *enunciatee* (textual simulacrum of the addressee) who is able to grasp the sense of the provocation, whatever the position on abortion. This is necessary for the frame debunking strategy to be effective.

«Life is always worth»: abortion and vulnerable social categories

In 2023, on the occasion of the 45th National Day of Life (5 February) called by the Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (CEI), Pro Vita & Famiglia had the poster in Figure 2 put up in many Italian cities. Against a white/grey background, it depicts various figures, and an interpretation of these is provided in the press release that accompanied the distribution of the poster: «what do a baby in the womb, a disabled young person, a pregnant woman, a migrant, an elderly person, a sick person and any other person in any condition of life have in common?» (Pro Vita & Famiglia, January 31, 2023). Below the seven figures stands the headline «Life is always worth», with the word «always» emphasised through the use of the colour magenta. Bottom right is the logo of the association.

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11. The Sender is the actant that determines the values which are at stake in the narrative and the Subject (the "hero") is charged with achieving in its action programmes (Marrone, 2007).

Figure 2. Source: Pro Vita & Famiglia, January 31, 2023

According to Pro Vita & Famiglia, what the figures have in common is «the absolute value of their life, always worth living» (*Ibidem*). In semiotic terms, we can argue that Pro Vita & Famiglia proposes itself as a *Sender* and all the seven figures in the poster can be interpreted as *Object(s) of value*, in which the same value, that of life, is inscribed[12].

The fetal personhood frame is employed by juxtaposing the fetus with various categories of people. However, through this poster, the organisation is affirming not only that a fetus is a human being with the same value as all other lives, but also that it constitutes a vulnerable social category to be protected from discrimination, alongside children, migrants, pregnant women, people with disabilities and elderly people. In this perspective, as confirmed by the press release, abortion - like euthanasia - is framed not only as a means of death, but also of discrimination. This is emphasised through the choice to portray a boy with Down Syndrome.

Furthermore, the choice to represent vulnerable social categories capable of arousing compassion also reveals the intention to leverage the pathemic dimension in order to be communicatively more effective.

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12. The Object of value is the actant in whom the value at stake in the narrative is inscribed.

All the figures represented can be variously traced back to the topic of abortion or euthanasia, which are central issues for Pro Vita & Famiglia. The only exception is the figure of the migrant. The choice to include it suggests the use of a framing strategy interpretable in terms of frame extension, which, as already explained, «entails depicting [a social movement organization's] interests and frame(s) as extending beyond its primary interests to include issues and concerns that are presumed to be of importance to potential adherents» (Benford and Snow, 2000, p. 625).

Who is this poster targeted to? Pro Vita & Famiglia doesn't specify this aspect in the press release that accompanied the launch of the poster, someway thus indirectly suggesting the will to address a broad audience. Confirming this, unlike in the previous poster, there are no particular references implying an enunciatee capable of catching them.

However, the employment of the frame extension strategy could suggest an intent to address in particular those people who are sensitive to the problems migrant people experience. This involves specific strategic implications. Since in Italy it is undoubtedly the left-oriented parties that have a more favourable attitude towards migrants, it could be argued that, by drawing a parallel between migrants and the other social categories represented, Pro Vita & Famiglia might somehow have wanted to suggest the inconsistency of the pro-choice positions expressed by the left (which is an opponent of the organisation). This would imply the combined use of the frame debunking strategy and the frame extension strategy.

Saving human cubs: abortion and the preservation of the planet

In May 2019, Pro Vita & Famiglia had a 250-square-metre poster (Figure 3) put up on a building in Rome. The poster, dominated by shades of red, depicts a fetus presented as «Michelino», specifying that it is 11 weeks from conception. Above the fetus stand the headline «Dear Greta, if you want to save the planet...let's save human cubs», with the footprint of a child's feet, and the logo of the association. Below the fetus, the hashtag «#Ichooselife».

Figure 3. Source: Pro Vita & Famiglia, May 14, 2019

Pro Vita & Famiglia employs the fetal personhood frame by attributing a name to the fetus («Michelino»). Besides, the idea that fetuses are human beings is emphasized by referring to them as «human cubs». These lexical choices reveal the intention to leverage the pathemic dimension.

The hashtag seems to serve as a tool for affirming Pro Vita & Famiglia's moral superiority by highlighting its difference from opponents who choose death rather than life. It can be interpreted as an application of the competitive framing strategy of polarization-vilification, by means of which the adversary is presented as an Anti-sender.

The headline calls into question the ecological issue by addressing Greta Thunberg, the famous young Swedish activist fighting against climate change. This issue is undoubtedly not central to Pro Vita & Famiglia's agenda, yet the organisation addresses it in order to highlight the

alleged contradiction between ecological and pro-choice positions, condemning abortion and dictating an order of priorities. Therefore, Pro Vita & Famiglia seems to employ the frame debunking strategy.

Greta Thunberg and the ecological movements in general are not direct opponents of the association. Why then this strategic choice? One possible explanation is that with this choice Pro Vita & Famiglia tried to ride a very topical issue that could mobilise many people and to exploit the media attention on Greta Thunberg, which was particularly significant at the time of the display of the poster since her presence in Rome a few weeks earlier had brought thousands of people to the streets. Similarly to the second poster, we can also speculate that Pro Vita & Famiglia conceives of ecological movements as opponents due to their proximity to the left-wing political world and therefore it tried to delegitimise them.

In semiotic terms, we could affirm that on the one hand there is the attempt to delegitimise a sender whose proposed values are contested, on the other hand there is the proposal of different values that underpin the narrative programme «saving human cubs».

Who is the poster targeted to? Given its size and location (Via Tiburtina, a very busy street), the poster appears to be intended for a broad and diverse audience, also bearing in mind the media echo that such a provocative poster can receive. However, the reference to «Greta» in the headline, without specifying the surname, implies an enunciatee who can understand that it is the Swedish activist.

Conclusions: how to resist?

The analysis of the three posters showes how frames and framing strategies are crucial to explore the dynamics of power, oppression and resistance that shape the debate on abortion.

With regard to abortion frames, what is striking in the three posters examined is not so much the recurring use of the fetal personhood frame as the representation of the pregnant woman to which it is coupled. In the first and second posters - as also reflected in the press releases that accompanied their distribution - the pregnant woman is depicted as a passive subject who is to be protected. In this regard, it is noteworthy that both posters portray a pregnant woman who is keeping her eyes

turned to her belly, thus denying herself to the gaze of the enunciatee. This suggests a kind of total absorption of the woman in the experience of pregnancy. In the third poster, instead, no female figure is represented, somehow denying the pregnant woman any role. She is invisibilised and excluded from the issue, thus being reduced to a mere incubator of new life (Maguire and Murphy, 2023).

Pro Vita & Famiglia proposes itself as a Sender and seeks to affirm a value system in which the right of women to be acknowledged and protected is that of becoming mothers.

This anti-choice representation of abortion is supported by the adoption of specific frame alignment and counterframing strategies. Indeed, we recognised the use of the frame debunking and frame extension strategies in the choice of addressing the issue of abortion by juxtaposing it with other issues (gender-based violence, migration, disability, preservation of the planet). These parallelisms serve as a tool to challenge prochoice stances and to delegitimise their supporters by emphasizing their alleged contradictory nature, as well as to seek resonance by leveraging topical issues that attract significant attention and interest.

This strategic approach involves specific implications: it can be interpreted as a form of instrumentalization of the issues and vulnerable social categories brought into play. Pro Vita & Famiglia appropriates their voice in order to assert its moral superiority over its opponents and promote anti-choice positions.

This raises some questions: how to resist and react to such communication strategies? What counterframing strategies to employ? One option could be to adopt a frame debunking strategy by unveiling and denouncing the instrumentalization by Pro Vita & Famiglia in order to delegitimise the association as a Sender. Another possibility could be to reverse the perspective and promote pro-choice positions by dealing with the same issues and vulnerable social categories called into question by the three posters (for instance, by framing the denial of women's right to choose as a form of gender-based violence). However, this could somehow entail the risk of incurring the same instrumentalization that is the subject of contestation. In order to mitigate this risk, the communication strategy should be a product of the subjectivities that have been instrumentalized (women victims of gender-based violence, migrant people,

people with disabilities), thus redressing the power imbalances that permeate framing processes and our societies.

In general, since abortion and abortion stigma are a matter of power, it is on the analysis and unhinging of power inequalities that communication strategies of resistance should be grounded. This implies not to consider framing processes as the mere search for cultural resonance. While alternative framing strategies may be ineffective in the short term, they may be «the only route to cultural transformations that delegitimate existing power relations» (Ferree, 2003, p. 340).

However, as pointed out by Baird and Millar (2018), even more radical pro-choice positions, which don't seek resonance, run the risk of reproducing an exclusionary logic. Therefore, we need to acknowledge the complexity of the abortion issue and «to open social and cultural space for many different experiences of abortion to exist as valid» (Cullen and Korolczuk, 2019, p. 16), so that no voice is marginalised.

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Reading together in silence to r/esist: a participant observation of a subcultural transformation in Palermo

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Introduction: to becoming human again

This study explores the social and relational value of shared silent reading within the initiative known as the New Reading Party, organized in Palermo by the association Newbookclub Community Lab APS in collaboration with Epyc – European Palermo Youth Center. This interdisciplinary research integrates psychology, pedagogy, and sociology to examine how an activity traditionally considered individual can become an opportunity for community-building and foster innovative forms of socialization and resistance (Wolf, 2018; Demetrio, 2012; Bauman, 2000).

Traditionally, reading has been predominantly conceived as a solitary and introspective act. This perspective is effectively summarized by Alberto Manguel (1996), who portrays the reader as an individual isolated in their room, immersed in personal contemplation of the text. Similarly, Sven Birkerts (1994) regards reading as a silent dialogue between reader and author, implicitly excluding any social dimension. The image commonly associated with a reader thus often evokes moments of isolation, emphasizing the individual experience aimed at pleasure, work, or study.

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Art history thoroughly illustrates various types of readers and contexts; books and their custodians are depicted within diverse situational possibilities. In many paintings, the reader is portrayed as a solitary figure within their own space: in *Girl Reading* (*Lesendes Mädchen*, Gustav Adolph Hennig, 1928), a young protagonist reads with immersion and concentration; in *The Subjugated Reader* (*Le Lecteur Soumis*, René Magritte, 1928), a boy is amazed by the words he is reading and becomes dominated by the emotions they provoke in him, leaning resignedly against a blue wall; in artworks from the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries depicting *Mary Magdalene Reading*, the woman's posture varies, yet she remains consistently portrayed with a single book in hand and few surrounding people or objects.

In an attempt to capture the true essence of reading today, we will offer a different representation, composed of observations, postures, groups, and purposes, which have transformed readers from solitary individuals into community members. Paraphrasing Maryanne Wolf's invitation in *Lettore, vieni a casa* (2018, trad. ita), we suggest, both metaphorically and concretely, that readers should not return home alone, but instead go out and meet other people to read together.

From this perspective, the New Reading Party represents an experience of shared, silent reading as a practice of cultural resistance and community-building that counters solitude and solipsism. Inspired by the Silent Reading Parties originated in the United States, the initiative proposes the simple yet meaningful act of individual reading in a collective space as an alternative form of social engagement, challenging dominant patterns of cultural consumption and socialization. The partial suspension of speech and the silent sharing of reading time become micro-political acts that facilitate the subjective reclaiming of time and space, promoting a non-standardized bibliodiversity.[2]

This approach is supported by findings from recent research on bibliotherapy, defined as a non-pharmacological intervention aimed at promoting psychological well-being through reading. In their mixed systematic review, Monroy-Fraustro *et al.* (2021) demonstrate that bibliotherapy can not only enhance mental health by addressing disorders such

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2. The term "bibliodiversity" refers to the promotion of diversity in reading practices, literary voices, and cultural perspectives. A form of cultural pluralism that resists the homogenizing tendencies of contemporary cultural production and consumption.

as depression, anxiety, and stress but can also encourage the development of fundamental values like autonomy, freedom, and justice. Through the processes of reading, reflection, and discussion of the texts, cognitive and emotional shifts are facilitated, enriching personal identity and strengthening emotional engagement, thus fostering empowerment processes and collective resilience.

The act of reading together in silence emerges as a suspension of passive consumption, fostering instead a subjective reclaiming of time and space, and opening up new modes of emotional interaction and community-building. In line with observations by Byung-Chul Han (2017), moments of suspension and concentration of this kind can be interpreted as forms of opposition to the accelerationist paradigm and the fragmentation of experiential time characterizing hypermodernity. Shared silent reading thus takes shape as a counter-temporal gesture, capable of resisting the logic of continuous productivity and rapid consumption of attention, thereby reactivating a contemplative life grounded in "the art of lingering", or the *Verweilen* (*Ibidem*) as a means of slowing down to experience time in a deeper and more mindful manner.

In this scenario, time is no longer experienced as an atomized succession of moments but as a dense duration, open to interiority, memory, and imagination. The silent co-presence of multiple readers, despite the absence of verbal interaction, generates a latent relational field in which the synchrony of absorbed gazes and collected bodies produces a subtle yet intense form of mutual recognition.

Shared silent reading, in this sense, is not limited to producing individual value; it activates dynamics of social cohesion, emotional closeness, and implicit participation that deserve attention and further investigation within the framework of community cultural practices.

Research conducted by Billington (2015) further highlights how reading fosters increased levels of empathy and a sense of belonging, even in the absence of explicit verbal communication. During silent reading events such as the one observed in this research, minimal bodily cues, postures, breathing rhythms, exchanged glances, generate a shared emotional field that contributes to strengthening the connection among participants.

This dynamic aligns with observations from the previously mentioned group bibliotherapy practices, in which the shared reading ex-

perience activates processes of self-reflection and emotional connection (Monroy-Fraustro *et al.*, 2021). The concept of "syncretic sociability", developed by José Bleger (1967) and elaborated by Claudio Neri (2001), proves particularly useful for understanding how experiences like the New Reading Party create invisible yet profound bonds among participants, analogous to the underground "mycelium" connecting mushrooms beneath a meadow. These bonds are grounded in shared rhythms, consistency, and common sensory perceptions, forming a substrate for the growth of an evolved and conscious sociability.

The openness of a group to new and returning participants ensures emotional continuity and permeable group boundaries, fostering an inclusive sense of belonging. In the New Reading Party, this function emerges clearly in the atmosphere of acceptance and suspension of judgment that characterizes the shared reading space.

Communication, understood as the process of transforming emotional experiences into symbolic thought and authentic relationships - according to Meltzer (1996) and Bion (in Sander, 2006) - also occurs through non-verbal modalities. From this perspective, silent group reading becomes a powerful form of communication, where communicating (Lavanco and Novara, 2012) represents the capacity to share experiences, emotions, and stories, promoting processes of mutual care and the construction of shared meanings.

Consistent with findings by Monroy-Fraustro *et al.* (2021), it is hypothesized that the experience of collective reading fosters a re-signification of personal values such as autonomy, freedom, solidarity, and mutual recognition, even outside a psychotherapeutic setting. Through symbolic engagement with diverse narratives and the shared experience of suspended time, silent reading functions as a mechanism capable of broadening participants' moral horizons (Monroy-Fraustro *et al.*, 2021), understood as the expansion of ethical awareness and reflective capacity, enhancing their ability for critical reflection and reinforcing a sense of social justice.

Considering these theoretical premises, the present study aimed to explore the social, relational, and transformative value of shared silent reading within the urban context of Palermo, through the experience of the New Reading Party. The qualitative methodology adopted, based on participant observation of a total of 80 participants and semi-structured

interviews, allowed investigation not only of observable behaviors but also of subjective perceptions, emergent emotions, and symbolic meanings attributed by individuals to this particular form of cultural gathering.

From Silent Reading Party to New Reading Party: historical and global perspectives

The idea of reading silently in the company of others has ancient roots: silent reading, distinct from collective reading aloud, became widespread during the Middle Ages, profoundly influencing the formation of subjectivity and the emergence of new forms of intellectual sociability (Manguel, 1996; Saenger, 1982). However, the modern concept of the Silent Reading Party arose in response to contemporary social needs: creating a shared space where individual reading becomes a communal experience, offering a pause from digital frenzy and constant connectivity (Surace, 2024).

This response also represents a form of cultural resistance: while reading itself can be understood as an act of resistance against the superficiality of informational consumption, silent collective reading adds a further, community-based dimension. It transforms an individual cognitive act into a shared practice of mindful presence and belonging, contrasting contemporary individualism and isolation. This practice is linked to a renewed desire for mindful presence and complete immersion, two dimensions often sacrificed in multitasking digital navigation. They also emerge as practices of "mental ecology", moments in which the mind frees itself from informational bombardment and reconnects with slowness, imagination, and inner silence.

In *A History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel (1996) reflects on how reading, initially a collective and often performative act in ancient times, gradually evolved into a silent, intimate, almost invisible gesture. In classical antiquity, reading aloud was the norm: people read to be heard. It was only with figures like Saint Ambrose, whom Augustine famously observed reading without moving his lips, that reading began to be conceived as an inward, almost spiritual act. Thus, Manguel argues that silent reading freed the reader from collective and ritual dimensions, pro-

viding profound access to oneself, a moment of fruitful solitude, but not necessarily less social. Reading, even when silent, creates invisible bonds: connections between reader and author, among readers of the same book, across eras and languages. It is, paradoxically, a solitary act of belonging, an imagined community in Anderson's (2016) sense, where readers recognize themselves as part of a shared cultural experience.

From this perspective, the spread of Silent Reading Parties can be interpreted as a renewed form of "postmodern cultural ritual", where the book becomes a silent medium through which a fluid, non-verbal sense of belonging is constructed. If medieval monks read alone to better understand the Word, if Borges read in the darkness of blindness and memory, today Silent Reading Parties revive that ancient gesture: reading together, yet silently. In a room full of people, each absorbed in their own book, what Manguel calls «a community of solitary readers», capable of sharing a space and a moment in time without needing to speak a single word. In this sense, Silent Reading Parties are not merely alternative cultural events; they represent the natural continuation of a thousand-year-old history, a modern form of literary ritual connecting the origins of silent reading in private libraries to the cafés, terraces, and Zoom parties of the present day. They are, in every respect, «a new secular sacredness of reading», just like the one that Manguel celebrates on every page of his book.

The first structured Silent Reading Party was created in Seattle in 2009 by Christopher Frizzelle, writer and former editor of *The Stranger* (Frizzelle, 2025). The event took place at the Sorrento Hotel, often accompanied by live background music, in a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere (Silent Reading Party, n.d.). The choice of the Sorrento Hotel was no accident; its elegant and intimate environment helped transform the reading experience into an aesthetic ritual, with the architectural setting becoming an integral part of the silent pleasure of reading. The true novelty, at the inception of the initiative, was that no one was reading the same book, and conversation was entirely optional, a silent revolution in urban sociality. Over time, the event became a regular and iconic fixture of Seattle's cultural scene, inspiring similar gatherings in other cities across the United States and abroad (Surace, 2024).

The format spread, and in New York it took on a new dimension. Here, events like Reading Rhythms transformed the original idea into a large-scale phenomenon, held on urban rooftops, featuring curated

musical accompaniment and alcohol-free environments; participants numbered in the hundreds, with waiting lists to attend. The shift toward metropolitan skylines and digital communities marked the global recognition of the Silent Reading Party as a shared cultural and social experience.

Similar initiatives also emerged before the pandemic, similar initiatives emerged, such as the Silent Book Club, founded in San Francisco in 2012 by Guinevere de la Mare and Laura Gluhanich, adopting the same philosophy of shared reading without mandatory discussion, further expanding the phenomenon on a global scale (Silent Book Club, 2022).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the Silent Reading Party adapted to social restrictions and moved online, with Zoom events attracting participants from around the world (Silent Reading Party, n.d.).

The adaptability of this format, both in person and online, demonstrates its ability to meet various cultural needs: non-intrusive social interaction, introspection, a sense of belonging, and shared time. Additionally, the formula lends itself to creative intersections, such as combining reading with music and settings in natural landscapes or unconventional urban environments.

In recent years, Silent Reading Parties have also found fertile ground in Italy, particularly among younger generations and within university and library contexts (Surace, 2024). Literary festivals such as the Salone Internazionale del Libro di Torino, Festivaletteratura in Mantua, and the recent Abracabook have started incorporating silent reading sessions into their programs. Here too, the initiative is spreading through literary cafés, libraries, and public spaces, promoting reading as a meditative and collective experience (*Ibidem*).

In line with these initiatives, several independent bookstores have also begun organizing silent reading evenings as a means to build customer loyalty and enhance the bookstore space as a place for reflection and social interaction, thus reinforcing their role as vital cultural hubs.

The success of Silent Reading Parties lies in their ability to transform a solitary activity into a communal experience, highlighting silence as a form of social interaction and promoting the pleasure of reading within a relaxed and stimulating environment (Faggiolani, 2025a; Silent Book Club, 2022). The increasing popularity of these events, from the United States to Europe, reflects a widespread need for tranquility, concentra-

tion, and genuine connection, addressing profound needs within contemporary society. In this sense, such events also assume a therapeutic function (Monroy-Fraustro *et al.*, 2021): they offer a protected mental space, free from aggressive and performative stimuli, and become, for many, a form of self-care comparable to mindfulness practices and contemplative disciplines.

Alongside Silent Reading Parties, a broader phenomenon has emerged: offline clubs and tech-free spaces that encourage people to set aside smartphones and digital devices in favor of genuine human connection. These spaces include restaurants, bars, and cafés where cellphone use is either prohibited or strongly discouraged, often featuring initiatives that reward those who choose to forgo technology to fully enjoy the present moment (Maurizio, 2024).

An emblematic example is the tech-free restaurant *Al Condominio* in Verona, which offers a free bottle of wine to customers who leave their cellphones at the entrance. In Tuscany, at Marina di Cecina, the restaurant Separè invites customers to deposit their phones in exchange for a discount voucher (Maurizio, 2024).

Internationally, formats such as The Offline Club in Amsterdam offer events hosted in welcoming cafés, where participants voluntarily commit to refraining from using digital devices. Similarly, in New York, as previously mentioned, following the Reading Rhythms movement, rooftop Reading Parties have emerged in Brooklyn, where people read silently for an hour before engaging in open discussion (*Ibid*em, 2024).

These examples highlight a widespread trend: the desire to rediscover the value of full presence and unmediated interaction, reaffirming the importance of sensory engagement and embodiment in cultural experiences. Moreover, they align with a broader global trend of digital detox and the search for balance between online and offline life, addressing a growing need to slow down, rediscover the pleasure of silence and reading, and cultivate direct human relationships.

In the Sicilian context, one of the most representative phenomena of this bibliophilic revolution is the New Reading Party, notable for its innovative methodology that harmonizes the rhythms and shared objectives of both spontaneous and formal practices described earlier. The New Reading Party is the name given to community reading events organized within the framework of the Newbookclub Community Lab APS. Like

all events organized by Newbookclub, this activity is also nomadic, itin-erant: it takes place across various locations within the city of Palermo, in collaboration with diverse local entities that host it.[3] In addition to encouraging a passion for reading, the New Reading Parties serve as a catalyst for building a community of readers, facilitating social, cultural, and emotional exchanges among participants. This is reflected in the very structure of the events.

Four phases can be identified in a New Reading Party, unfolding se-quentially from the participants' initial gathering to the conclusion of the event.

- Phase 1. Gathering: the opening of the event is informal and min-imally structured. Participants gather at the scheduled time, which does not coincide with the actual start of activities. This initial period allows attendees to engage in preliminary exchanges, get acquainted, settle into the environment, and receive an introduction to the event from the Newbookclub starters.
- Phase 2. Getting Acquainted: the New Reading Party officially begins with an icebreaker question posed to the participants (e.g., name a book you're embarrassed to have read, and one you're proud to have read). Participants respond one by one. This phase is fundamental to community-building, as participants initially become acquainted and later have opportunities, during subsequent phases, to further explore any curiosities sparked by these initial interactions. After completing this round, the shared reading phase begins.
- Phase 3. Shared Silent Reading: this phase is designed to be as si-lent as possible, lasting between one hour and an hour and a half. Interactions are not strictly forbidden, but participants who wish to converse are invited to move away from readers and keep their voices low, allowing others to remain focused on reading. A distinguish-ing feature of the New Reading Party is the participants' freedom to choose their own reading material. The venues typically provide ample space, allowing readers to move freely and comfortably find their preferred spot and position.

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3. Examples include cultural and social venues such as Cre.Zi.Plus at the Cantieri Culturali alla Zisa and Libreria MilleMondi, which have hosted New Reading Party events.

- Phase 4. Calls and Sharing**:** The event concludes with a moment dedicated to collective feedback and sharing, bringing participants back together into a cohesive group. Each reader has the opportunity to make a "call" – asking the group for book recommendations based on specific preferences – or to read aloud a passage from the book they've just finished or another text, sharing personal reflections. Like the second phase, this moment significantly fosters the development of bonds that strengthen the community of readers.

The need for Silent Reading Parties today: a strategy for the physical reappropriation of time and space

The spread of Silent Reading Parties reveals a collective desire to rediscover forms of community based on presence and shared silence. In contrast to dominant models of communication that privilege speed and performativity, these practices foster a space of proximity and coexistence that resists contemporary individualism. Reading together in silence transforms solitude into a shared experience, allowing participants to cultivate a sense of belonging without the need for constant verbal exchange.

Silence, in this context, does not represent the absence of communication but rather an alternative form of it, a relational language that allows participants to connect through shared attention and embodied presence. The collective dimension of silent reading thus becomes a form of social competence, where mutual recognition occurs beyond words and where reading turns into a subtle social bond. These practices, by revaluing stillness and contemplation, challenge the logic of visibility and self-promotion that pervades digital culture, offering instead a quiet form of being-together.

This revaluation of slowness and shared presence acquires an even deeper meaning when considered within the broader dynamics of contemporary society. Theoretical reflections on modernity have long emphasized how acceleration, hypercommunication, and informational overload shape our experience of time and relationships. Marc Augé (1992) introduces the concept of «supermodernity», characterized by an overload of information that creates difficulties in managing person-

al time. Paul Virilio (1996) speaks of «dromocracy», the dominance of speed shaping everyday life. Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes «liquid modernity», characterized by precariousness and fluidity in social relationships. Carmen Leccardi (2009) defines the «culture of urgency», Rosa (2013) discusses the «acceleration society», Calabrese (2020) highlights social fragmentation generated by hyperconnectivity, Silvia Rossi (2021) describes the chronic burnout syndrome in contemporary society, and Stefano Tomelleri (2022) emphasizes the «presentism» intensified by the pandemic.

In this context, the New Reading Party emerges by proposing an experience of shared, silent reading as a practice of cultural resistance and community building (Batini, 2011).

As previously highlighted, this approach is also supported by research on bibliotherapy (Monroy-Fraustro *et al.*, 2021). Through the processes of reading, reflection, and discussion of literature, cognitive and emotional shifts occur, enriching personal identity and enhancing readers' sense of agency, thereby promoting processes of empowerment and collective resilience. Thus, the act of reading together in silence opens up new forms of emotional interaction and community building.

Among the authors guiding the theoretical framework of this research, Byung-Chul Han (2017) highlights how contemporary society, dominated by transparency and hyper-communication, generates a form of digital isolation and loneliness, paradoxically hindering authentic and deep relationships. In this sense, Silent Reading Parties offer a space for conscious disconnection, restoring a dimension of authentic presence and unmediated interaction.

Research design and methodology

The observational study presented here was conducted using a qualitative approach, specifically employing the technique of participant observation. This methodology, widely recognized in the social sciences for its ability to uncover meanings and relational dynamics through the researcher's direct experience within the studied context, has been explored in recent works, such as that by Masessa De Dovitiis (2022), who investigates its overall potential in a variety of complex environments.

The main objective was to analyze the relational, behavioral, and emotional dynamics emerging within a collective reading context. The observational phase took place during the New Reading Party event, organized in Palermo by the association Newbookclub Community Lab APS in collaboration with Epyc – European Palermo Youth Center.

The aim of this research was to contribute to the discussion on community reading experiences as practices capable of fostering innovative forms of socialization, as highlighted by Faggiolani (2025b), and as potential acts of symbolic resistance against accelerationist culture and the fragmentation of experiential time (Tomelleri, 2022; Han, 2015).

Among the primary research questions explored were: What do people experience in a context dominated by silence yet characterized by total immersion in a narrative? What do they perceive and feel in the close presence of others – strangers or acquaintances – who, like themselves, symbolically attempt, through this suspended time, to shift their focus away from their individual stories (marked by a constant race against time) toward a collective dimension?

The research team consisted of seven participant observers: Gabriele Lo Iacono, Giorgia Eufrasia, Clara Candela, Delia La Gattuta, and Simona Barranca. Each research assistant followed a flexible protocol guided by preliminary shared guidelines.

The qualitative data collection tools employed were:

- individual field diaries, written at the end of each phase of the activity;
- semi-structured observation grids, in some cases enriched with behavioral parameters;
- semi-structured interviews conducted with a small sample of participants, aimed at gathering subjective perceptions related to the lived experience.

The approach was consistent with established practices in participant observation, which involve a combination of immersion, empathy, and systematic data collection (Masessa De Dovitiis, 2022).

Regarding the research setting, the event took place in a large room arranged with seating in an elliptical or rectangular shape. The environment featured warm lighting and intermittent background music. Ap-

proximately 80 participants attended, varying in age and cultural backgrounds.

Event structure

The observed event lasted approximately two and a half hours in total, divided into three distinct phases (excluding the gathering phase).

1. Introductory Phase (18:00-18:45)
   Participants introduced themselves and shared the books they brought. In this phase, researchers began active observation, focusing particularly on postures, initial reactions, and interaction patterns;
2. Immersive Reading Phase (approx. 18:45-20:00)
   This timeslot was dedicated to individual and silent reading. Observers noted bodily cues, levels of immersion or distraction, micro-interactions, and responses to environmental stimuli;
3. Concluding Phase (approx. 20:00-20:30)
   Participants engaged in reading aloud and spontaneous conversations. During this time, some observers conducted brief exploratory interviews.

Qualitative data collection and analysis: interviews and participant observation

The data collected in written form, both through observation grids and individual field diaries, were subsequently organized into macro-themes, allowing for the identification of common patterns and interpretative divergences. The adopted approach highlighted both the subjective and introspective dimension of reading, as well as its collective and relational aspects, which emerged most clearly in the concluding phase. For the selection of the convenience sample, qualitative data were collected ethically, with prior informed consent from participants. Interviews were conducted with volunteers based on a self-selection criterion: each participant freely chose whether or not to be interviewed, actively

expressing their willingness. This approach likely resulted in the inclusion of individuals more inclined toward reflection and dialogue about their experiences. The limited number of interviews was justified by this selection criterion as well as the intention to maintain a mode of dialogue as spontaneous and immediate as possible, conducted immediately after the reading phase. Such methodological choices align with the exploratory and preliminary nature of this research. The semi-structured interviews were designed according to the research objectives and followed a common outline consisting of four main questions. A summary of responses from each interviewee is presented below.

Why did you decide to participate in the New Reading Party?

Interviewee 1: participated to experience a community activity, driven particularly by the desire to "listen to the silence of others". He observed the participants and shared the experience of silence with them;

interviewee 2: had long been searching for a similar experience, though she believes reading to be a primarily individual act;

interviewee 3: describes himself as introverted and participated out of a love for reading. It was his first time. He reported noticing more interaction among participants compared to the drawing events he usually organizes;

interviewee 4: attends the New Reading Party to meet others who share a passion for reading;

interviewee 5: experiences the event as an escape from everything, a time dedicated solely to herself, allowing her to read in a welcoming and suitable environment.

How did you experience the New Reading Party?

Interviewee 1: it was his first participation; he read with a level of concentration he hadn't experienced for a long time. The environment was stimulating;

interviewee 2: greatly appreciated the experience, as it helped her overcome the obstacle of public self-introduction;

interviewee 3: approached the event with curiosity, noting new book titles to read thanks to interactions with others;

interviewee 4: found the experience positive; it was not his first time. He perceives these events as valuable opportunities for sharing;

interviewee 5: felt fully integrated into a community. Positive dynamics emerged, and she especially appreciated how warmly she was welcomed.

Did you notice moments of greater or lesser immersion?

Interviewee 1: recognized alternating moments of immersion, partly due to surrounding movements;

interviewee 2: did not report significant variations in her level of immersion;

interviewee 3: did not indicate particularly notable moments of immersion;

interviewee 4: found background noise distracting; he also reported experiencing some fatigue and discomfort reading on a chair, which he does not consider an ideal spot;

interviewee 5: for her, concentration depends on the type of reading material. Though she naturally enjoys chatting, she prefers a completely silent environment

How did the group/community influence your reading?

Interviewee 1: did not feel directly influenced, but perceived his reading as part of a collective collaboration;

interviewee 2: did not perceive any group influence;

interviewee 3: despite it being his first time, did not feel influenced by the group;

interviewee 4: was not influenced by the presence of others;

interviewee 5: initially felt somewhat intimidated and distracted by the presence of the observers.

In general, the five interviewees provided positive feedback about the afternoon they spent, highlighting the benefits of shared reading. Among them were both first-time participants and individuals already familiar with the format. None of them perceived the background music as disruptive, and all reported maintaining a good level of concentration during their reading.

We observe that silence is redefined: it is no longer merely a space for personal pause, but also an opportunity for non-verbal contact with others through the shared experience of the moment. Notably, participants reported perceiving a sense of community, along with appreciation for the opportunity to connect with individuals who share their passion for reading. Furthermore, the environment of the New Reading Party allows participants to experience reading both in its most solitary form and as a personal space for escape, providing an opportunity to reclaim time dedicated to oneself.

From the interviews, we do not obtain clear information regarding levels of engagement during reading, as they appeared highly variable and potentially influenced by factors such as background noise, interest in the chosen book, fatigue, and the comfort of the seating position.

From responses to question four, we can infer a widespread perception of the readers' group as non-intrusive, along with the absence of felt pressure or influence, highlighting the welcoming nature of the event.

Partecipant observation

The joint analysis of observations recorded through observation grids allowed for the identification of several recurring behavioral categories, which constitute the primary findings of the observation.

Posture and body positioning

Throughout all phases of the event, significant postural variability was observed. During the immersive reading phase, approximately 85-90% of participants maintained composed postures (legs crossed, books resting on their laps or held in their hands). Over time, some individuals adopted more relaxed positions, removing their shoes, stretching their legs, or leaning sideways. While maintaining formally correct postures, certain participants exhibited bodily signals indicative of concentration or mild tension, such as small repetitive movements (rocking, self-comforting gestures), interpreted as markers of immersion or attention self-regulation strategies.

Signs of immersion and distraction

Observation highlighted a noticeable polarization between highly engaged participants and those more susceptible to distractions. In the initial phases, attention levels were generally high; however, after the first 30-40 minutes, attention declines occurred, marked by wandering gazes, brief verbal interactions, and phone usage. Nevertheless, around 60% of

participants maintained a consistent level of immersion, as evidenced by personal annotations, underlining, and facial expressions elicited by their reading.

Relationships and interactions among participants

Silent interactions were observed, including glances, smiles, brief hand contacts, and implicit exchanges of attention. In some pairs, these interactions evolved into quiet conversations. In the concluding phase, a marked increase in spontaneous socialization was recorded. Openness to shared readings and verbal exchanges highlighted the potential of reading as a community practice.

Effects of external stimuli

Ambient noises (doors opening, murmurs, footsteps, intermittent music) elicited heterogeneous reactions. Some readers appeared sensitive and easily distracted, while others maintained their concentration or quickly regained focus. Additionally, the presence of observers and photographers created minor interferences, though these did not significantly compromise the overall experience.

Observations indicated that, following an initial period of familiarization with the environment, many participants succeeded in identifying positions and postures that made them feel more comfortable. The context provided by the New Reading Party emerged as a protected and restorative space, capable of sustaining concentration and suspending the accelerated rhythm of daily life. The observed distractions appeared largely attributable to natural declines in attention rather than significant external interferences.

In this context, the structure of the experience proves particularly effective in promoting interpersonal relationships unmediated by digital devices. The shared time, marked by silent reading, allows for a redefinition of both physical and emotional spaces.

Outcomes and reflections on the process

The New Reading Party experience enabled an in-depth exploration of the transformative potential of shared silent reading as a practice of community building and cultural resistance.

On an individual level, participants described shared reading as an opportunity for well-being, regeneration, and a pause from the accelerated pace of daily life. Many emphasized how the silent presence of others promoted deeper concentration and a sense of emotional security, confirming findings from literature on bibliotherapy and the psychological value of reading (Monroy-Fraustro *et al.*, 2021; Billington, 2015).

At the collective level, the silent co-presence generated a form of syncretic sociability (Bleger, 1967; Neri, 2001), composed of minimal bodily signals, collected postures, absorbed gazes, subtle smiles, which created a latent relational field and a widespread sense of belonging. The spatial arrangement and absence of judgment facilitated the inclusion of new members and lowered barriers among participants, making the community fluid and welcoming.

On a symbolic and cultural level, the practice of shared silent reading emerged as a counter-temporal and micro-political gesture, capable of resisting the logic of fragmentation and constant productivity typical of contemporary society (Han, 2017; Bauman, 2000). The bibliodiversity expressed through the sharing of texts enriched the collective experience, fostering curiosity, openness, and exchange.

These outcomes suggest that the New Reading Party is not merely a reading space but rather a laboratory for relationships and a therapeutic setting, where the suspension of speech and shared time generate well-being, cohesion, and new forms of cultural resistance.

Conclusions

The exploratory nature of this research, which lacks substantial practical references in the existing scientific literature, necessitated the selection of specific investigation tools suitable for observing the New Reading Party event. Following a more qualitative, micro-pedagogical approach, the object of study was organizationally framed in the first part to better

understand the procedural schema (Demetrio, 2020), subsequently collecting participants' representations of this schema through interviews. The collected data reveal that experiencing shared reading within a context of intentional silence promotes a form of emotional and symbolic closeness. Participants, immersed in their own narratives, appear to perceive the presence of others as an element that supports and amplifies a collective sense of belonging (Faggiolani, 2025). Reading, thus conceived, becomes an act of suspending accelerated time, creating a space in which individuality is not erased but reflected in others, even when those others are strangers.

The postures, gestures, micro-interactions observed, and narratives gathered from the interviews suggest that within this suspended time, a silent connection is formed. In this sense, collective reading emerges as an act capable of generating new forms of sociability and mutual recognition.

Supporting this thesis is the history of the Newbookclub, founded in Palermo in October 2012 as a reading and writing group by, which over the years evolved into an experiential laboratory, a methodology, a project, and ultimately, a community of passionate readers and writers. Today, it operates within the framework of the Newbookclub Community Lab APS, coordinated by the starters, Simone Napoli, Gaia Garofalo, Nazareno Inzerillo, Margherita Chinnici, Morena Famà, Federica Perez, Ester Di Bona, Clara Vella, and Roberto Franzitta. Its reach extends beyond Palermo, encompassing other urban contexts that have benefited from its implementation, such as Naples, Padua, Copenhagen, Berlin, Daugirdiškės, Tsaghkadzor, and Nuremberg.

Its primary goal has been to foster awareness and promote the collective pleasure of writing and reading by using public spaces as a setting, spaces considered reservoirs of urban and natural, historical, and cultural resources (Martini and Sequi, 1995). The initial phase encouraged broad community participation, especially among younger generations, and aimed to identify and remove barriers to social competitiveness (Noto and Lavanco, 2000).

With the expansion of its associative activities, the New Reading Party represents an innovative and powerful subcultural practice, addressing contemporary needs for authentic connection, cultural resistance, and the recovery of genuinely experiential time (Rosa, 2013; Han, 2017).

Indeed, the NRP thanks to the continous presence of a great core of aficionados, has built a human environment rooted in shared values, experiences, emotions, and thoughts. All that founded a strong subculture over time.

Future studies could further explore the long-term potential of this practice, examining its effects on community-building, social inclusion, and mental health. Testing and evaluating these initiatives across various urban and rural contexts would fully reveal their transformative potential and inform inclusive and emancipatory cultural and social policies.

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