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RESEARCH ARTICLE

DIRECT SOCIAL ACTIONS AND ECONOMIC CRISES

The relationship between forms of action and socio-economic context in Italy

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses continuities and discontinuities across time in Italy in the use of *direct social actions*, defined as forms of action that focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself, instead of claiming something from the state or other power holders. In doing this, this article offers two main illustrative hypotheses. First, that direct social actions represent a significant part of the repertoire of contention - at least in Italy - and that while they tend to be less visible than protest actions, they should still not be overlooked and treated like something "new" every time they resurface. Second, this article claims that the socio-economic context plays an important role in influencing the extended use of DSAs: if the supply of these forms of action by political actors is constant across time, what changes is the demand, that in times of economic hardship tends to characterise a broader constituency. We conclude by suggesting empirical methods to verify the hypotheses proposed, paving the way for future research on this topic.

KEYWORDS: direct social action, resilience, repertoires of contention, anti-austerity protest, economic crises, Italy

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1. Introduction:

On the 6th of May 1978, Gilles Ceron wrote the following satirical commentary in *Le Monde*, in reference to the Italian crisis of the day:

Bad News from Italy. Rome, late April 2021. As a result of the tragic events which have been occurring here, the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Italian Republic has been very soberly celebrated. It will be recalled that the Italians have never had a sense of the State, because of their long history of invasions and divisions, and that, in the climate of institutional disintegration, the days of the Italian Republic are numbered. On this occasion, the President of the Italian Republic received numerous messages of sympathy, notably from the Prime Minister of the XII French Republic, the Presidents of California, Wyoming, and forty other North American republics, from the kings of Murcia and of Wales, and from the Grand Duke of Schleswig-Holstein. (Quoted in: Salvati 1979, 46)

April 2021 has still to come, and the idea of Italy going through a dramatic crisis, with the President receiving messages from the Scottish and Catalan presidents, among others, is at this point far from science fiction. For the moment, these words seem at least partially prophetic. Back in 2011, the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy was celebrated quite soberly by the President of the Republic and the other institutions, due to the constraints imposed by the economic crisis in which the country was, and, unfortunately, still is embroiled.

We have decided to use this quote to introduce our work because it shows how the idea of such a dramatic economic crisis in Italy is far from new and how the representation of the economic crisis in the 1970s was quite similar to what is happening today - a situation whereby the economic crisis and the related public policies have dramatically influenced both the daily life of European citizens and the public debate throughout the continent for the last five years.¹ No social or political actor in contemporary Europe can propose an agenda without referring to the recession, to the rising levels of unemployment, to the mechanisms of control of public and private debt, or to the cuts to welfare systems and public services (Giugni and Lorenzini 2014). This process has included several episodes of political contention that have been shaped or at least influenced by the social and economic context (Kriesi 2012; Bramall 2013; della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Della Porta 2015).

Against this background, social movement scholars have observed over the last number of years an increase in forms of participation that ignore or circumvent the traditional state-addressing repertoires of action, and that focus instead on a 'self-

¹In this article we focus in particular on the economic dimension of the Italian crisis. However, we are well

changing' society as part of everyday politics, in which the distinction between the public and private spheres is blurred (Kousis and Paschou 2014).² Alternative forms of resilience, mutualism and prefigurative politics are different labels that often define the same set of phenomena: boycotts, solidarity action, political consumerism, alternative finance (e.g. crowd funding, food banks), collective purchasing groups, occupations, self-management, free legal advice and medical services, to mention just a few. There seems to be an increase in the types of collective action that we refer to in this article as *direct social actions* (hereafter, DSAs). In deploying this broad and comprehensive concept, we have in mind actions that do not primarily focus upon claiming something or other from the state or other power holders - whether this might be seen in revolutionary or reformist terms - but that instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself.³

These practices are often presented as something new, unexpected and unprecedented. This article aims to challenge this "newness". By doing so, we acknowledge the peculiarities of what is happening at this particular historical conjuncture, but we claim that DSAs have surfaced and resurfaced many times, being consistently a part of the existing repertoire of action, and that a context characterised by economic crisis and austerity plays a significant role in their extended use. In order to demonstrate this, our article focuses instrumentally on the Italian case, and in particular on the continuities and discontinuities between the presence of DSAs in the current context of crisis and austerity, and in two other dissimilar stages of Italy's recent past. One such stage dates to the 1970s, when Italy was convulsed by a major wave of contention during a period of economic hardship; the other to the 2000s, when a period of economic stability formed the backdrop to the mobilization of the Global Justice Movement (hereafter, GJM). Based on the similarities and dissimilarities in how DSAs presented themselves in these three different periods, we propose two main arguments, which we formulate as hypotheses for further research.

Firstly, we argue that DSAs represent a significant part of the repertoire of contention - at least in Italy - and that while they tend to be less visible than protest actions, they should still not be overlooked and treated like something "new" every time they resurface.

² Throughout this article, the terms "forms", "practices" and "actions", as well as "repertoires of collective action", "repertoires of contention" and "tactical repertoires", are used interchangeably.

³ By focusing in this article on DSA we do not want to imply that conventional forms of action have somehow disappeared. Rather it seems quite clear that DSA serve now days as springboards for more conventional forms of action and anyway interact with these.

Secondly, and clearly connected with the previous point, we claim that socio-economic context plays an important role in influencing the extended use of DSAs. In fact, through our comparison with the 1970s episode, we seek to elucidate how the current economic crisis seems to favour the emergence of instances of DSAs characterised by significant similarities with those of that decade of economic hardship. And, through the comparison with the 2000s, we show how the current economic crisis favours the reshaping of DSAs that originally developed in a very different context; that is, they developed out of a politics of altruism and 'ethical' action, amid economic conditions that were generally stable.

If the supply of these forms of action is constant across time, what changes, in our hypothesis, is the demand in times of economic hardship. Indeed on the supply side, political actors have, structurally speaking, the possibility to resort to DSA, but the choice to do so is related to the level of demand for such forms of action in the constituency to which the actors refer. Thus it is not only the case that in the current context of economic hardship, actors have a strong incentive to propose forms of action that characterised a previous period of crisis (the 1970s); it is also the case that when they appropriate and utilise forms of action developed in a different kind of economic context (like the 2000s), they tend to reshape them in an effort to address the wider audience that the economic crisis provides.

In the following section, relying on the social movements literature, we briefly refer to the conceptualization of repertoires of contention, suggest which main factors usually influence the selection of forms of action, and explain what we mean by DSA, and how this concept relates to the existing literature. In the remaining part of the article, we then point out the most relevant cases of DSA in Italy in, firstly, the current wave of anti-austerity mobilisation, secondly in the 1970s, and thirdly during the GJM. We conclude by discussing the relationship between DSAs and the social and economic context in Italy across time, and by suggesting empirical methods to verify the hypotheses proposed, paving the way for future research on this topic.

2. Repertoires of contention and Direct Social Actions

If one of the constants in the social movements literature has been to present contemporary episodes of contention as novel, or at least as different from previous ones - probably due to the interest of scholars to justify their latest research - it is also true that such readings have often been challenged over the last forty years. We are, in a sense, not saying anything new in this article by suggesting that today, repertoires of

action cannot be presented as entirely novel, and that “tactical innovation” (McAdam 1983) is something exceptional rather than the norm. It is widely known that social movement activists do not reinvent the wheel every time they mobilize. Repertoires, instead, are “reproduced over time, because they are what people know how to do when they want to protest. The forms of action used in one protest campaign tend to be recycled in subsequent ones” (della Porta and Diani 2006, 182). The selection of actions is the result of a very limited menu of options that activists have in front of them (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1998; della Porta and Diani 2006).

As first introduced by Charles Tilly (1978), the notion of the repertoire of collective action referred to a 'toolbox' of various established forms of action - or 'templates' of action - available for actors to draw upon. This they did because they considered these actions to be practicable for the achievement of a variety of purposes: to persuade or coerce authorities; to express a shared sense of collective identity; to shape value systems; to mobilize resources during contentious interactions with other actors for the intended purpose of challenging or resisting change, and so on. Thus, it has become one of the staple concepts of the social movement literature (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004).

The ways in which social movements select particular tactics instead of others are intrinsically linked to their views of society, the critique they wish to put forward, and the changes they aim to bring about. Social movements take action within specific social environments, which make certain action forms appear adequate while others look unacceptable or futile. The processes that lead to such choices - the collective and individual making-sense - are vital to understanding the dynamics of participation, particularly in times of crisis, when the set of accepted action forms is reconfigured. However, repertoires of action are not only influenced by their socio-political environment - that is, its type, or its 'temperature' at any given time. They are also influenced, through direct (i.e. biographical impact or abeyance structures) and indirect routes (i.e. media coverage), by the diffusion of tactics from earlier movements to later ones, or between contemporary movements - what social movement scholars have called the spillover effect (Meyer and Whittier 1994; Whittier 2004).

The focus of our work is on a wide set of different collective action phenomena, which we have analysed from different points of view. In fact, the emergence of forms of action based on the idea of a self-changing society (what we define as DSAs) - instead, that is, of appealing to state authorities to produce a change in public policy - has been discussed in different contexts, with different approaches that tend to capture different aspects of the phenomenon.

For example, in the context of the scholarly dialogue on collective action and different forms of activism - particularly as it relates to the analysis of altruism-driven forms of action - the concepts of *economic activism* and *sustainable community movement* have been proposed:

SCMOs [sustainable community movement organisations] can be defined as social movement organisations that have the peculiarity of mobilising citizens primarily via their purchasing power and for which the main 'battlefield' is represented by the market where SCMOs' members are politically concerned consumers. (Forno and Graziano 2014, 142)

The focus here is on the choice of various types of economic behaviour as part of a political strategy - choices relating, in particular, to political consumerism, purchasing groups, local organic food schemes, community renewable energy initiatives, eco-housing, community currencies and time banks (Forno and Graziano 2014). These forms of action are utilised for different long-term goals, following diverse ideological approaches - from the construction of an alternative society to the creation of dissenting niches within a free market economy. What they share is the idea of politicizing economic choices and empowering citizens in their role as consumers. In short, they identify economic choice as political behaviour.

Shifting the focus from 'ethical' economic actions in the context of the Global Justice Movement to solidarity actions developed as coping strategies in the context of the current economic crisis, quite a similar approach has brought us the concept of *alternative forms of resilience*:

Alternative forms of resilience are nonmainstream/capitalist economic and noneconomic practices through which citizens build community resilience when confronted with hard economic times through austerity policies, decreasing social welfare policies and threatened economic and social rights. (Kousis and Paschou 2014,10)

In this case, the focus is not only on the form of the action, but also on the social and economic context in which it takes place - namely that of the current economic crisis and of the implementation of austerity policies. This approach has mostly been applied to solidarity-based exchanges and networks, cooperative structures, barter clubs and networks, credit unions, ethical banks, time banks, alternative social currency, citizens' self-help groups, and social enterprises (Kousis and Paschou 2014). Once again we are referring to forms of action that belong mainly to the economic realm, frequently overlapping with those identified in the previous category, but this time with an important

difference; in this case, the shift is from the politicisation of economic choices as part of an 'ethical' approach to the pursuit of global justice, to the development of economic actions (characterised by different levels of politicisation) geared towards coping collectively with the everyday challenges posed by wider social and economic problems of a structural nature - those of crisis and austerity.

Another debate, with roots both in social movement studies and in radical political activism (especially that connected to the anarchist and post-autonomist tradition (Holloway 2002, 2010)), has eschewed a focus either on forms of action or on their social and economic context, in favour of the concept of *prefigurative politics*. This is defined in terms of the relationship between collective action and the state:

'Prefiguration' or 'prefigurative politics' refers to a political action, practice, movement, moment or development in which certain political ideals are experimentally actualised in the 'here and now', rather than hoped to be realised in a distant future. Thus, in prefigurative practices, the means applied are deemed to embody or 'mirror' the ends one strives to realise. (van de Sande 2013, 230)

This definition has been applied to a wide variety of forms of action, particularly ones focused on the act of occupying: housing occupations, squats, occupied social centres, occupied squares and *acampadas*, and occupied and self-managed schools, universities, theatres, cinemas and factories. Such actions tend to be considered more confrontational than those identified by the definitions cited above ('sustainable community movement organisations' and 'alternative forms of resilience'), but they share with these other types of actions a focus on a self-changing society, which prefigures a post-capitalist way of life rather than addressing the state with demands. Prefigurative politics is not, then, defined strictly in terms of the form of the action, but more in terms of the meanings and interpretations attached to a given action. Thus, occupying and self-managing spaces provides the opportunity to put ideological principles into effect, and to experiment with a different reality - often refusing or at least challenging the legitimacy of state authorities in doing so.

These definitions apply to different sets of phenomena, tackling them from different points of view, and they have proved useful for the scholarship on collective action. Nevertheless, we consider that the arguments we present in this article may be valid for a broader set of phenomena than those identified by each of these approaches. It is for this reason that we propose the concept of *direct social action* to capture the broad set of phenomena we address in this work. By DSA we mean, generally speaking, forms of collective action that aim at directly changing, by means of the very action itself, some specific aspects of society *without* being primarily oriented towards securing the

mediation of public authorities or the intervention of other actors (e.g. opponents in labour struggles). These forms of action have in common a primary focus on the political power of the action itself, instead of its capacity to express political claims. In this way, we aim to encompass, in our analysis, confrontational and non-confrontational forms, actions that are characterised by high and low levels of politicisation, and repertoires informed by different long-term goals and political traditions. We are not denying the political nature of these forms of action: we are stating that their political nature is primarily expressed through the act of directly transforming society, rather than through claim-making addressed to power-holders. Some of these actions are accompanied by the expression of political claims as conventionally understood (such as, for example, the demands addressed to companies in a boycott, or the requests of changes in housing policies that sometimes are expressed by occupiers); however, these claims tend to be in addition to the transformative power of the action itself. What is important for the purposes of this work is that the forms of action that we consider are *direct* - that is, aimed at having a non-mediated impact on their object - and they are *social* - that is, they address society, or at least some parts of it, rather than state authorities or other power-holders.

3. Today: Direct Social Actions in Times of Crisis and Austerity

Italy in the last number of years has seen the visible emergence of various DSAs: forms of economic activism like purchasing groups, boycotts, critical consumerism, time banks and mutual cooperation have been significantly increasing, broadening their audience and evolving in a direction that is increasingly related to the satisfaction of material needs, in the context of the economic crisis (Forno and Graziano 2014; Andretta and Guidi 2015); labour conflicts have been resurfacing, and in some limited but significant cases, the occupation and self-management of factories has been reappearing (Caruso 2014); occupation and self-management have also extended to cinemas, theatres and other spaces of cultural and artistic production (Giorgi 2014); and housing occupations have drastically increased in some of the biggest cities (Deriu 2009).

These different DSAs share some common traits not only from a morphological point of view, but also in their relationship to surrounding social and economic structures. This relationship is articulated in different ways: in some cases there is a visible correspondence between these forms of action and social sectors hit particularly hard by the crisis (e.g. factories closing down and public cultural institutions experiencing cuts), while in other cases what is clearly observable is the way in which economic hardship

broadens the audience for forms of action that politicise aspects of daily life (e.g. economic activism and housing occupations). Furthermore, in all of these cases the presence of claims related to the economic crisis and to austerity policies has been identified.

Housing occupations have a long tradition in Italy: not only, as we will see in the next section, was the practice widespread in the 1970s, but it lingered on to some extent in cities such as Florence well into the 1990s and 2000s (Maggio 2005). However, at no point in the last three decades had housing occupations reached the scale, level of coordination, or sheer centrality in the public sphere as they have now in the context of the economic crisis. There is no national map of occupations, although the websites of local networks like *Movimento di Lotta per la Casa* in Florence⁴, as well as the national network *Abitare nella Crisi*,⁵ can give us some idea of the phenomenon's general outlines. Thus we can say that the geographical distribution of the current wave of housing occupations is clustered around the big metropolitan areas of Rome and Milan, as well as medium-sized cities of northern and north-central Italy such as Turin, Florence and so forth; we can say something of its social composition, to which migrant families are important; and we can say something of its political make-up, which has been shaped by post-autonomist social centres⁶ and, more generally, by radical anti-capitalist groups. In making sense of this Italian experience, it is useful to follow Hans Pruijt's (2012) typology of occupations, which distinguishes between deprivation-based squatting, squatting as an alternative housing strategy, entrepreneurial squatting, conservational squatting and political squatting. Thus we can see that the current wave of housing occupations in Italy seem to share some traits of both deprivation-based squatting and political squatting. With respect to the former, we see as protagonists poor, working-class people suffering severe housing deprivation, and we see demands for housing policies to provide accommodation for poor, working-class families. As for political squatting, the important role played by post-autonomist political groups is worthy of note, as are the radical political demands expressed, and the tendency to adopt confrontational tactics. This is reflected in the report of the national meeting of the *Abitare la Crisi* network in June 2013, which makes a twofold call for action. Firstly it calls for a "day of action and struggle for a national moratorium on evictions" - that is, local ac-

⁴ <http://www.inventati.org/lottaxlacasa/>

⁵ <http://www.abitarenellacrisi.org/>

⁶ By "post-autonomist social centres", we mean the squats whose political culture is in continuity with the tradition of Workers' Autonomy (*autonomia operaia*), a critical Marxist movement most active in Italy in the second half of the 1970s. The history and development of the Autonomist movement are inextricably intertwined with those of squats and occupations in Italy (Mudu 2012).

tion on housing-related demands. Secondly it calls for a “national demonstration for housing and income, to be brought about through a broad and inclusive process, open to contribution from all antagonistic and conflictual realities, and aiming at a convergence and a connection between struggles”. Thus, the latter call passes from the domain of local action to that of a national demonstration, seeking to include radical political actors, and to broaden and radicalise political demands. The document claims that through occupations, people were “taking back a house in which to live” at the same time as “experimenting with and constructing a different model of social and human relations” (Abitare nella Crisi 2013).

The practice of occupation has been particularly notable among workers in the cultural and artistic sector, who between 2008 and 2012 occupied and self-managed dozens of cinemas, theatres and other abandoned spaces, claiming them as “commons” (Giorgi 2014). Furthermore, forms of occupation and “permanent presence” have been central to the protests against the closure of productive facilities accompanying the recession that started in 2008. In that same year, for example, the workers at INNSE, a Milan steel mill marked for closure, occupied their workplace to stop the owners from taking away the machines; their next step was for five of the workers to scale a crane, declaring they would stay there until a solution were found. This sparked a wave of similar action, as the workers of many other factories at risk of closure took to climbing the roofs of their workplaces, or local monuments or other city landmarks (Caruso 2014). The most famous case is probably that of *L’Isola dei Cassintregрати* (literally “The island of workers on redundancy payment” – a play on the name of a well-known reality TV show portraying the daily lives of celebrities on an exotic island). Over fifteen months in 2010 and 2011, a group of chemical workers occupied an abandoned prison on the island of Asinara off Sardinia, launching a media experiment which they called “the only real reality show”. Blogging their individual and collective stories from the island, they attracted the attention of national and international media (Nurra and Azzu 2011).

New forms of economic activism are also visible; for example within Rifondazione Comunista,⁷ among the activities proposed since 2008 by the “department for the social party” (a specific department within the party, devoted to practices of social resilience in the context of the economic crisis), the most visible and significant action has clearly been the organisation of “popular purchase groups” to help working-class families cope with the increasing price of food. The symbolic association between this expe-

⁷ The largest radical left party in Italy in the 1990s and 2000s, which in 2008 failed, for the first time in its history, to secure parliamentary representation at a general election, falling short of the necessary electoral threshold.

rience and that of the “solidarity-based purchase groups” born in the early 2000s is immediate, in the Italian context. This is merely one example of a broader phenomenon that we will analyse in section 5: the diffusion of practices elaborated around the Global Justice Movement in the early 2000s to a markedly different context - that of the current phase of economic crisis and austerity policies - and the ways in which these practices have been adapted and reshaped in the process.

Furthermore, there is a limited but significant occurrence of attempts to re-establish mutualist initiatives, in an effort to create an alternative, from below, to welfare retrenchment. In particular, there are a considerable number of experiments addressing a specific component of the workforce (i.e. precarious workers, and in particular independent freelance workers) that has been structurally excluded by the Italian welfare system. Co-working spaces, in which freelance workers have the opportunity not only to share a workstation, but also to establish relationships and share access to common services, are increasingly popular in Italy. This is even if their levels of politicization, or alternatively commercialization, are far from homogeneous, ranging from occupied social centres to rented spaces. In this context, a debate is flourishing on the development of welfare experiments from below, in an attempt to provide through freely established relationships of cooperation and solidarity the levels of assistance and social security that state-managed welfare programs are no longer providing to a significant part of the population (Ciccarelli 2014).

4. Direct Social Actions and the 1970s Economic Crisis.

The situation of contemporary Italy resembles to a great extent that of the 1970s. It was in that period too that an expanding state deficit and a structurally weak economic-productive system experienced the shock of an international economic crisis.⁸ Likewise, then as now, the rates of inflation and unemployment were greatly increased as a result, as economic growth slowed down and stagflation set into the Italian economy (Salvati 1979). In the 1970s, like today, the austerity measures enforced by the government were aimed at reducing public expenditures and passing the cost of the economic crisis onto those strata of the Italian population that depended most on public social services. This pushed social movement activists who were already affiliated with

⁸ The international economic crisis, starting in the early 1970s, was the product of two main transformations: firstly, the change in 1971 from an international monetary system based on fixed exchanges (Bretton Woods) to one based on flexible rates; and secondly, the 70% increase in the price of oil from 1973 onwards.

the extra-parliamentary left to advocate various counter-measures: self-reduction (*autoriduzione*) of public transport fares, public utility bills and cinema and concert tickets; 'proletarian shopping' (*spesa proletaria*); housing occupations; and projects to establish self-managed amenities such as day-care centres, schools, clinics, food markets and other social services (Grispigni 1997; Cuninghame 2002; Gagliardi 2014).

Self-reduction became particularly popular in the big cities as a means to fight rising electricity, health-care, housing and phone charges. It was also implemented by commuters in deciding collectively for themselves what to pay for public transportation, rather than going along with set fares, and by consumers in availing of recreational activities such as cinema and concert-going. Through self-reduction, it was the needs and means of ordinary people that set the cost of living, rather than any other market calculi – this being done in order to protect the poor from the increased service charges unleashed by economic austerity measures (Alemanni et al 1975; Wright 2002). This repertoire of action emerged in the autumn of 1974 in Turin in response to the Carli Plan (named after the director of the national Banca d'Italia, Guido Carli), which prescribed "massive price increase in transportation, electricity, telephone, health care and housing" (Cherki and Wieviorka 1980, 73). The starting point was when commuting factory workers reacted collectively to the increase in the private transportation cost of the tickets "by 20% to 50%" (ibid). This was followed some weeks later by the initiative of some 150,000 families to self-reduce their electricity bills (Cherki and Wieviorka 1980, 76). Next, self-reduction diffused into the realm of leisure, with the self-reduction of movie and concert tickets, under the slogan: "enough with the poverty, we want to get our hands on the wealth" (Circoli proletari giovanili di Milano (eds.) 1977; Echaurren and Salaris 1999; Gagliardi 2014)

Around the same time, activists were also starting to organize 'proletarian shopping' (*spese proletarie*). On October 12th 1974, the city of Milan saw one of the first instances of organized shoplifting, when activists entered a supermarket and forced the manager to sell merchandise at reduced prices - or what they deemed reasonable for these products (Controinformazione 'Milano: la spesa politica' 1974 (5-6), 12-13). Such proletarian shopping, in the form of forcing supermarket managers to cut prices, expanded to other big cities, and was soon extended to the expropriation of food from restaurants. At the same time, activists were also involved in the establishment of food markets where they sold staple goods at below retail prices.

This was one of the practices typically carried out in abandoned buildings that had subsequently been squatted, such as disused schools and factories (Sorlini 1978; Adinolfi et al 1994). The first occupied and self-managed social centres (CSOA) emerged in Rome in 1974, but quickly spread to Turin and Milan and other main cities,

numbering as many as fifty or so by the end of 1977 (Ginsborg 1990, 382). They were used as meeting points and places to provide social services that were not provided by the state, such as day-care centres, schools, clinics, markets (of food and clothes) and so forth. One of the first to be founded was the *Centro Sociale Leoncavallo* in 1975 (Ibba 1995), and it was clearly anchored in the immediate social and educational needs of its local neighbourhood. This was clearly articulated in its first public document:

... Here is a preliminary list of the social structures which are insufficient in our district or even completely missing:

- A CHILDCARE FACILITY
- A KINDERGARTEN SCHOOL
- A PEOPLE'S SCHOOL
- AN INTERCOMPANY CAFETERIA
- A MEDICAL-GYNAECOLOGICAL CLINIC
- A LIBRARY
- A PEOPLE'S GYM
- SPACES FOR PEOPLE'S THEATRE INITIATIVES, MEETINGS, DEBATES, CULTURAL AND SOCIALISATION INITIATIVES

With the building occupied, if we are supported by a mobilization of the whole district we can cover some of these requirements (CSO Leoncavallo 'Un centro social nel quartiere? Si se lottiamo per tenerlo', 18th October 1975, quoted in Cuninghame 2002, 177-178)

Social centres were originally established with the goal of contributing to a new conception of social service that strongly reflected contemporary ideas about self-management, and to pursue ideals and models of alternative ways of living. Cecchi et al (1978) attempted to capture this ethos in an early piece of research on the social centres of Milan:

Social centres were endorsed by the antagonist class and turned, with the sign changed, in a proposed alternative against the use of the territory as a place of the economy, such as self-governing islands of exaltation of the contradictions of the social fabric and the territory, as areas of re-appropriation of use values of the urban and the disintegration of values commodified, as points of incubation of dissent and class recomposition. (16)

It is interesting to note how the correspondence we observe between DSAs of the 1970s and those of the current austerity context has also been identified by other authors engaged in the diachronic or genealogical analysis of one specific actor. The work

of Pierpaolo Mudu is a case in point: in his historical reconstruction of the trajectory of occupied social centres in Italy, he pays attention to the issues upon which social centres focused their activities at different points in their history. This story arcs from self-reduction and the struggle against the rising cost of living - so typical of the first phase of Italian social centre history (1975-1979) - to the years in which the most salient issues were the anti-nuclear campaign and the campaign for the legalisation of drugs (during the 1980s and 1990s), and on to the most recent phase (post-2000), characterised once again by the occupation of houses (Mudu 2012, 72). This example refers to social centres, but the re-emergence of these practices suggests the existence of a variety of “abeyance structures” capable of “sustaining collective challenges under circumstances unfavourable to mass mobilization” (Taylor 1989, 765).

With the economic crisis of the early 1970s onwards, homelessness soared as many families felt the brunt of a severe housing shortage, and this in turn led to an upsurge of collective action in the housing sector (Daolio 1974; Marcelloni 1979; Lagana', Pianta and Segre 1982). Self-reducing rent (in the case of public housing tenants) and squatting unoccupied property were not uncommon repertoires. As Lumley writes, “Squatting was an important form of action for the movement. Squatting had spread in the mid-seventies so that in February 1976 an estimated 1,500 units of public housing were occupied.” (1990, 299). However, we should remember that occupations usually triggered violent confrontation with the authorities, with injuries and even casualties on both sides (Panvini 2014, 349-354). Indeed, while we are noting the correspondence between similar DSAs and similar economic conditions in the 1970s and today, we must also bear in mind the differences: in the 1970s, Italy was in the throes of an aggravated social conflict that spilled over into high levels of political violence. The same cannot be said of Italy today. As the first author of this article has pointed out in a recent publication (Alimi, Demetriou and Bosi 2015), an initial wave of student and worker protest demanding “more democratic decision making, rejecting over-bureaucratization, and aiming for a more humanist understanding of politics” (59) gave way to an anti-capitalist mobilization aimed at bringing an international socialist revolution to the country. This evolution of the movement, reacting in large part to the closure of the political system, to state repression and to the violence of the fascist counter-movement, was visible from the early 1970s on. For the workerist⁹ groups that were

⁹ The term “workerism” (in Italian *operaismo*) refers to a Marxist current developed in the 1960s, particularly by intellectuals such as Raniero Panzieri, Toni Negri and Mario Tronti, that considered the working class as the main active force of economic and historical development, and theorized the possibility for it to act as an autonomous subject with respect to capital. Two of the most important groups of the Italian

leading the extra-parliamentary left movement at this time, such a revolution was hoped to emerge from the combination of the economic struggle in the big industries with the “new” proletariat represented by the students, unemployed, lumpenproletariat, and all other marginal forces capable of exerting a radical push forward in a period of economic crisis. In their decision to move the struggle from the factories into the cities (*Lotta Continua* “Prendiamoci la Città” November 21st 1970), these groups were trying to cope with a declining phase of mobilization by aiming to recruit new militants at the same time as trying to build those “red bases” instrumental for the next step of the insurrection. As Bruno Bonomo (2014, 177) has suggested, “The line of independent committees descended ... from a central theoretical assumption: the fight for housing was nothing but an articulation of the more general struggle against high prices that the proletariat had led from the conflict in the factories over wages.”

5. The GJM and the Diffusion of Direct Social Actions

Some of the forms of action that we identify as DSAs have been a fundamental part of the repertoire of contention of the GJM. We are referring in particular to practices of economic activism that, according to the literature, were popularised in Italy during the mobilisations of the early 2000s, in a context characterised by a focus on global issues and on transnational solidarity, and which are now being reshaped in the new context of the economic crisis and austerity.

While in the previous section we aimed to build a structural comparison between the 1970s and the current context, claiming that similar conditions of economic crisis favour the emergence of forms of DSA, in this section we attempt to identify the roots of one part of the current repertoire of DSA in a previous wave of mobilization – that of the GJM of the early 2000s. We argue, based on an analysis of the existing literature on the topic, for the existence of a spillover effect (Meyer and Whittier 1994; Whittier 2004) between the GJM and the current social movement landscape in Italy, with the transmission of a broad set of practices included in our definition of DSA. Furthermore, we argue that the economic crisis and austerity policies are broadening the audience for such practices, and reshaping some of their traits.

radical left in the 1970s (*Lotta Continua* and *Potere Operaio*) were part of this current of thought. For a brief history of workerism, see Wright (2002).

In their research on sustainable community movement organisations, Francesca Forno and Paolo Graziano briefly reconstruct the history of some of the most common forms of economic activism, recording that

the rise of political consumerism was strongly influenced by the events that followed the so-called Battle of Seattle (the demonstration against the WTO in 1999 which took place in Seattle). As it is known, the Global Justice Movement has identified in the market as one of its main privileged arenas for political activism (della Porta, 2006; Micheletti, 2003). And it is during this period that political consumerism began to extend to an increasingly large number of people. (Forno and Graziano 2014, 141)

Choosing the market as a fundamental space of political struggle implied weakening the focus on the state as an addressee for political claims, and shifting the movement's energies towards a bid to change society directly. Furthermore, as Mario Diani has shown, the choice of economic activism was an efficient response to the growing interest in global issues on the part of local organisations, who found in their "propensity to adopt a distinctive action repertoire, emphasizing consumers' role—whether as boycotters of certain products or as promoters of fair-trade practices" (Diani 2005,64) - the means to address issues whose scope went far beyond their own geographical presence. A third reason for the emphasis on economic activism in the GJM, other than the centrality of the market and the need to address global issues, was the general distrust of GJM activists for political representation and parliamentary politics. As shown by Donatella della Porta's research on the first European Social Forum in Florence in 2003, the activists' trust in parties, governments and parliaments was extremely low – especially among the Italians (della Porta 2005). Thus, in their internal attempts to assess "the political change-producing capacity of this movement", GJM activists had some reason to bypass the state and invest their energies in "the proliferating experiments involving direct relationships with corporations, including labour standards monitoring in the apparel industry, forest certification regimes, and fair-trade campaigns in the coffee sector, among others" (della Porta 2005, 225).

The diffusion of economic activism has traditionally been associated with distrust of representative institutions, but this attitude was supposed to characterise only certain strata of the population - particularly those with high levels of education, sufficient wealth, and an interest in post-materialist values:

the increase in the use of political consumerism recorded over the last twenty years among wider sectors of the population binds with the emergence of a new type of citizen who combines a strong support to democratic principles with growing distrust towards

public institutions and traditional representative channels (such as, for example, political parties). [...] The “critical citizen” - which is characterized by a specific socio-economic profile, having usually a higher level of education and income - shows a particular willingness to bear the costs (both in terms of money and time) of experimenting with innovative ways of action and participation for the promotion of the “common good”. (Forno and Graziano 2014,141)

The impact of the economic crisis and austerity policies on economic activism in Italy has still to be thoroughly evaluated, but some elements of the analysis can already be sketched.

Firstly, the distrust of representative institutions that characterised the GJM has significantly increased among the participants in anti-austerity protests (della Porta and Andretta 2013). Street politics and institutional representation have never been as far away from one another in Italy’s contemporary history as they are not. This has much to do with global long-term trends relating to the “vertical transformation of democracy” (Lavenex 2013,93), in line with the globalization of the economy (which the Euro-zone crisis has revealed to the general public), and with the inability of contemporary European parties to bridge the gap between responsibility and representation (Mair 2009). Thus, the demand for forms of action independent of political representation and of the state's responsiveness is unsurprisingly growing.

Secondly, the economic crisis and austerity policies seem to have broadened the field of actors interested in participating in forms of economic activism. For example, the preliminary results of the on-going research conducted by Massimiliano Andretta and Riccardo Guidi on solidarity-based purchasing groups in Tuscany (Andretta and Guidi 2015) suggest that: a) the number of purchasing groups more than doubled after 2008; b) more producers are interested in cooperating with purchasing groups in order to find a favourable sales channel; c) the social composition of the purchase groups tends to vary, and is increasingly including lower middle-class members; and d) according to purchasing group members, both economic hardship and the rising critique of the contradictions of capitalism are pushing more people to question their economic choices.

Thirdly, research on the relationship between anti-austerity protests and the legacy of the GJM shows that, according to activists involved in both waves of mobilization, there is a certain continuity in terms of repertoires of contention, in spite of other clear discontinuities; that is, the ethically-oriented, altruistic and opinion-based nature of the GJM contrasts with the current wave of anti-austerity protest, which is seen as less idealistic, and more oriented towards ‘bread-and-butter’ issues. The economic crisis, according to activists, has opened up an extreme and dramatic new phase, which calls

for urgent and concrete action, instigating a shift from the altruistic approach of the GJM to a more materialistic point of view (Zamponi and Daphi 2014, 212-213). Thus, the concreteness of DSAs and their potential to materially constitute an attempt to change society seem to resonate with this sentiment, increasing the potential pool of actors participating in them. Furthermore, this shift towards attitudes that are considered more materialistic than those characterising the GJM may play a role in adapting and reshaping such practices.

To sum up, in the relationship between the current phase of social movement mobilization and that of the GJM of the early 2000s, we observe the easily recognisable presence of the diffusion of tactics from an earlier movement to a later one - what social movement scholars have called the spillover effect (Meyer and Whittier 1994; Whittier 2004). Furthermore, we observe significant changes in the adoption of such practices in the context of economic crisis and austerity policies: the broadening of the field of potential participants, determined by economic (in the sense of the crisis), political (in the sense of the increasing distrust towards representative institutions) and cultural (in the sense of a growing critique of capitalism, and a growing appetite for immediate and concrete action) factors, seems to have at least partially changed the social composition and the political meanings of these forms of action. Research on these processes is still at an embryonic phase, and more empirical analyses are needed in order to verify these hypotheses, and to formulate more developed explanations.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

In our work we have shown that DSAs, which are often described as new, unexpected and unprecedented in the context of the contemporary economic crisis, in fact have recognisable antecedents in the economic crisis of the 1970s and in the GJM of the early 2000s. We discuss now the similarities and differences between DSAs at these different points in time, focusing in particular on the ones that seem more relevant to the main focus of this article. Finally we conclude by suggesting possible way forwards in further developing this research topic.

If we have shown that some of the DSAs that we currently observe in Italy have quite recognisable precedents in the 1970s, we should not fail to note that it is the least confrontational components of the 1970s DSA repertoires that current social actors seem to draw upon. Occupations, for example, seem more frequent than self-reductions. This pattern can partially be explained by differences in the composition of the actors behind DSAs then and now. If in the 1970s, as we have said, the extra-parliamentary

left movement was utilising such repertoires partly as a way to cope with a declining level of mobilization during a period marked by a high level of violent (e.g. armed) conflict (Tarrow 1989), now such repertoires are employed by a wider set of actors, characterized by a more pluralist political background than that of the extra-parliamentary left of the 1970s. They are also being directed more towards initiating a new wave of protest than coping with a decline in mobilization. It seems clear that more confrontational forms of DSA were accepted in the left-wing subculture of 1970s, which would today be difficult to garner any sympathy for. In the background to this stark difference is the much lower level of political conflict preceding the current moment, as well as the explicit goal of many of the relevant actors to address the largest possible part of Italian public opinion, far beyond the most politicized sectors. This testifies to how violence is culture-dependent. That is, much of what would be considered violent in one society can be perceived as non-violent in another one, or in another historical period (Rucht 2004). However, despite these differences, which we are not denying, the similarities with the 1970s seem to show some form of visible relationship between a context of economic hardship and the extended use of DSAs. This might depend on certain grievances generated by the structural context, on the change in the composition of movements produced by the crisis, and on the withdrawal by the state from certain fields of society, as part of the direct consequences of austerity policies and welfare retrenchment.

With the GJM of the early 2000s, we have seen a very similar presence of DSAs, particularly in terms of economic activism, critical consumerism, purchasing groups, and so forth. There appears to be a continuity in economic activism that attributes political meaning to market behaviour, but the economic crisis seems to favour a recontextualisation and reshaping of these practices. If, in the early 2000s, activists of the GJM were involved in such DSAs partly as a way of building a collective identity through private action, now these forms address a wider audience, beyond the bounds of organized politics. DSAs are being reshaped, shedding some of their more “altruistic” and ideological layers, and taking on a more materialistic character. The same discursive and organisational tools that ten years ago were used to enforce international solidarity and global justice are now used to cope with the economic crisis.

The relationship between repertoires of contention and movement evolution (from a focus on one issue to another) is a particularly interesting topic. Donatella della Porta, in her study of the evolution of the repertoire of contention of left-libertarian movements in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s, identified a clear correspondence between the shift of such movements from traditional socialist and class-based issues to environment-focused goals, and the adoption of more pragmatic attitudes in choosing

forms of action – the latter becoming less and less confrontational, “with an increasing tendency to bargain” (della Porta 1995, 36). What we observe in our analysis is that the renewed salience of economic issues, in line with the current context of economic crisis and austerity, seems to bring back some elements of the repertoire of action of the 1970s, albeit at a lower level of confrontation. This may be due to both the different stage of the protest cycle that is involved (it is now in its initial phase) and to changed political context. Meanwhile, the converse seems to happen to DSAs elaborated in the pragmatic and rarely confrontational context of GJM economic activism, when they are reshaped and recontextualized in times of economic crisis and austerity, and in the midst of structural injustices and the rise in material needs. It is at this point that they seem to evolve towards a more radical form. The use of DSAs seems to be connected to a need for urgency and concreteness typical of a context of crisis, as well as to an increasing distrust of political authorities.

This article, through the analysis of similarities and differences in the use of DSA in Italy in three different periods, proposes hypotheses on the role of the socio-economic context, of the most relevant actors and of the constituencies they address. In order to deepen our knowledge of the similarities and differences that we have started to describe in this article, and to verify these hypotheses, some systematic empirical research is clearly needed. In particular, a deep qualitative analysis of DSAs might well help us to shed light both on the processes we have described in this article, and on more detailed mechanisms. These might include the diffusion of such practices in time (collective memory, abeyance structures, etc.), the connection between their emergence and economic, social and political contexts, and the factors that influence activists as they choose from different repertoires of contention, while attempting to act strategically. Our aim would then be to trace the trajectory of such practices across time, underlining how the use of DSAs goes through phases of visibility and latency, and looking at which different actors adopt them, as well as why these practices are adopted in specific periods. However, DSAs are quite distinctive social movement practices, which we believe, because of their low level of visibility, are less conducive to being studied through the protest event analysis method than through ethnographic research in contemporary movements (Balsiger and Lambelet 2014), and through archival research and interview-based oral history pertaining to past mobilizations (Bosi and Reiter 2014).

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