

Reclaiming The Commons: Radical Democracy in Italy

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Caught between privatisation, successive austerity plans, the deterioration of social services, and the rise of the far right, some Italian citizens are organising to meet their own needs without state assistance. At the heart of their efforts lie the reappropriation of the commons and experiments with other ways of doing politics based on self-management, maintaining complex and ambiguous relationships with public institutions. The following article considers five projects in Naples, Bari, and Rome that are helping to build a new imaginary of living together in our cities.

June 2011 marked a watershed moment in the debate on the commons in Italy. In a national referendum, 27 million Italians voted against the privatisation of the country's water services, considered a common good. This coincided with intermittent workers from all over Italy gathering in Rome to mobilise against the government's austerity policies and their grave consequences for the cultural sector. A group of actors, directors, musicians, creative staff, and technicians decided to occupy the city's Teatro Valle, a national theatre abandoned by the state in 2010 in the context of budget cuts for the arts.

The occupiers joined forces with legal experts from the 2007-8 Rodotà Commission on the reform of the Italian Civil Code – which had proposed enshrining the commons within it – to launch the Constituent for the Commons (Costituente dei beni comuni) and put the commission's theories to the test. This collective legislative experience enabled the development of bottom-up legal tools, bringing together cultural and social struggles around the question of the commons.

Inspired by the six-month occupation of the Teatro Valle, the Naples-based La Balena Collective – founded by a group of precarious workers active in the cultural and creative sectors – began occupying a former convent owned by the City of Naples known as the Ex Asilo Filangieri in March 2012. Thanks to the strong support of the local population, the city's newly elected mayor, Luigi de Magistris, agreed to establish a dialogue on the future of the Asilo. De Magistris, a former magistrate who – unusually – had run as an independent candidate, also appointed Alberto Lucarelli as the city's first deputy mayor for the commons. A professor of public law at the University of Naples and a former member of the Rodotà Commission, Lucarelli's work was instrumental in introducing the legal category of common goods into the aims, objectives, and fundamental values of the City of Naples.

In April 2012, the Naples Laboratory for a Constituent of Common Goods (Laboratorio Napoli per una Costituente dei beni comuni) was established by a municipal resolution. Its mission was to draw up an inventory of abandoned municipal properties to enable citizens to develop collective projects of social utility. One month later, the Asilo was recognised as a common good, which granted its informal community of "immaterial workers" free use of the building and transferred responsibility for water and electricity. However, due to disagreements between the municipality and the community over the rules for the use of the space, it was not until 2015 that L'Asilo's first declaration of urban civic and collective use (Dichiarazione d'uso civico e collettivo urbano) – and thus the self-governance of the community,

informal by nature – received official recognition. Now, anyone wishing to use the space is able to do so, subject to compliance with the declaration and the agreement of the weekly management assembly, which is open to all.

The common good network in Naples

Although widely used, the term “*beni comuni*” (“common goods”) is not unproblematic, in that it risks objectifying the commons and thus fails to capture the social process at work within them.

According to Elinor Ostrom – an economist specialising in the governance of the commons and the first woman to win the Nobel Prize for economics – there is no clear definition of the commons that accounts for their plurality. However, she identifies three major constituent elements: a resource, a community, and rules of access and use set by that community. More than simply a resource or a good, a common can be considered as a “common action”: a way of doing and deciding together. According to sociologists Christian Laval and Claire Brossaud, “With the commons, we are dealing with the emergence of a completely different form of social organisation: one in which people participate directly in the definition, development and production of uses that concern them directly.”

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The *beni comuni* of Naples illustrate this tension perfectly. Despite their name, the defining feature of these spaces is their activities and their communities, not their ownership. Naples’ common goods are spaces of emancipation for inhabitants, based on shared practices of “urban and human regeneration”. Born from civil disobedience, these urban commons are a way for citizens to reappropriate the city by opposing its financialisation and proposing alternatives to neoliberal logics. They oppose hierarchical dynamics and are based on the principles of self-management, cooperation, mutualism, inclusivity, free access, conviviality, and equity. Faced with the challenge of economic profitability, the *beni comuni* respond with “civic profitability” based on a gift economy and the absence of economic barriers to guarantee the inclusion of all.

Above all, the Neapolitan approach to the urban commons is centred on the desire to “liberate” spaces so that they can be returned to citizens for civic and collective use. Today, thirteen “liberated spaces” make up the network of *beni comuni* in Naples. Ten have been recognised as common goods by the city council; seven of these have drawn up their own declaration of urban civic and collective use.

The *beni comuni* thus embody philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre’s “right to the city” which can be understood as the fundamental right to individual and collective fulfilment as well as the access to the infrastructure needed to achieve this. Although the commons make it possible to manage resources as autonomously as possible from the state and the market, governmental intervention is nevertheless necessary to guarantee a basic level of economic resources. The risk of instrumentalisation of the commons by the state – which can then refrain from fulfilling its social function – of course remains.

Without aiming to take power, the commons are nevertheless vectors of social and political transformation that can influence public authorities. Born at the Asilo, the informal Massa Critica (“Critical

Mass”) collective played a major role in the creation of a Permanent Observatory on the Commons – which aims to evaluate policies relating to the commons and participatory democracy – by the City of Naples in 2012. And in 2015, the collective launched a municipalist platform to influence public and political debate during that year’s local elections. The commons can therefore be spaces for political experimentation in radical democracy that go far beyond the places invested and their uses.

“The commons are places of resistance, and I think it’s very important to preserve them, even if they don’t have the same power as the city. I believe they remain places of possibility where we can develop new ways of doing and thinking,” said Maria Francesca De Tullio, constitutional law researcher at the Ex Asilo Filangieri.

Emancipation through self-management in Bari

Villa Roth, an abandoned neoclassical villa located close to the centre of Bari in south-east Italy, is now home to around twenty refugees. It is the only self-managed space by and for refugees in the city, which has seen major waves of migration since the start of the Libyan crisis in 2011. Mutual aid and emancipation are at the heart of the values shared by the community. The residents of Villa Roth, who offer fellow refugees assistance with administrative and legal formalities, are now seen as privileged interlocutors by the city council, which recognises the social usefulness and autonomy of the community. Nevertheless, although the city council allows the community to use the property and provides sanitary facilities, it refuses to pay for renovation work on the dilapidated building, and the community still has no legal status.

This ambivalence on the part of the authorities extends to the broader issue of decent housing for refugees. While Villa Roth was eventually handed over to this community of residents, it was only after years of struggle and wandering – on the streets and in camps. After their arrival in Bari in 2011, a group of 200 refugees, faced with a lack of support from the local authorities, organised protests and blockades and occupied an abandoned, insalubrious building. Initially, the city council provided the community with a tent camp set up inside a disused factory, which could only be occupied by those in possession of a residence permit.

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Although a certain degree of autonomy was possible, unlike life in a camp, the living conditions were just as deplorable, with temperatures reaching 50°C in summer. To solve this problem, the municipality proposed building a temporary emergency camp made up of prefabricated housing, the only structures financed by the European Union. The refugee community rejected this solution and demanded more permanent care. It wasn’t until 2015 that the municipality finally handed over two additional sites to the refugees in reaction to the media exposure of their shameful treatment by Cecilia Strada, then president of NGO Emergency.

The first location is run by a cooperative that receives money according to the number of people it takes in. By redistributing only a small portion of this to its refugee residents, and by applying very strict living conditions, the cooperative greatly compromises its residents’ autonomy and professional integration.

As detailed above, the city council handed over the second site, Villa Roth, to an informal and self-managed community. Residents receive no public subsidies, make their own decisions at weekly horizontal assemblies, and are guided by the principles of emancipation and mutual aid.

Beyond the difficulty of accessing housing, refugees seeking work in the region often find themselves embroiled in a vast network of agricultural exploitation. Hoping to enable real integration and empowerment but with no assistance available from the local authorities, the Villa Roth community was forced to rely on its own resources. In 2011, it co-created the NGO Soledaria in collaboration with Bread & Roses, a self-managed space for mutual aid. Soledaria legally employs refugees to make SfruttaZero (“Zero Exploitation”) tomato sauce, which is sold via the FuoriMercato national direct food sales network. Soledaria provides all employees with a work contract, which is a prerequisite for the renewal of refugees’ residence permits, and pays them a decent wage.

Porto Fluviale: a legalised occupation

Located in the industrial district of Ostiense in Rome, the Porto Fluviale occupation is easily recognisable by its huge, multicoloured façade. Here, Italian street artist Blu has depicted a large vessel filled with real estate speculators being attacked by pirate ships belonging to the occupation movements. This former Italian army logistics depot, built in 1919 and abandoned in the early 1990s, has been occupied since 2 June 2003 by Italian housing activists and families from the migration waves of that period, mainly from Ecuador, Peru, and Morocco. Nearly 150 people live there, in 56 households.

Porto Fluviale follows the Italian tradition of *centri sociali*: citizen-run social and cultural centres open to all. Developed in the 1990s in the context of privatisation and state withdrawal, they aim to “liberate” spaces by reappropriating them to combat social inequality and urban segregation.

Initially an emergency housing occupation, Porto Fluviale saw other social, cultural, and political activities develop within its walls from the 2010s onwards, when it opened up to the outside world and forged links with nearby Roma Tre University. Ideas emerged for projects such as a circus hall, a jewellery workshop, a bicycle repair stand, a silk-screen printing workshop, a Thai massage room, and a tearoom, all of which can now be found on the first floor of the building. The various activity groups are organised in horizontal assemblies, as are the inhabitants, who meet on a weekly basis.

When in 2019, under the mandate of Mayor Virginia Raggi of the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement), the residents of Porto Fluviale were informed that they were facing eviction, they drew on their relationship with the university to propose an alternative solution. At around the same time, the Italian Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport launched the National Innovative Programme for Housing Quality, an investment programme for the implementation of social housing and renovation and rehabilitation projects for buildings meeting certain ecological and social criteria, accompanied by a call for proposals aimed at municipalities.

Through the university’s architecture department, the residents of Porto Fluviale began discussions with the municipality’s deputy urban planner, himself a former professor at Roma Tre University. Together, they developed the Porto Fluviale RecHouse project, which aims to both maintain the community of residents that are already involved in the life of the district, and to give the building a new public purpose. In addition to renovating the dwellings, the project also involves turning the central courtyard into a public square open to the neighbourhood. The first floor will host a weekly market, reception services for women victims of violence and elderly people, and a sustainable mobility centre.

In order to gain legitimacy in the eyes of the funding authorities and increase their chances of success, the residents of Porto Fluviale formed a cooperative. They also conducted a self-census and created associative statutes for existing activities. This represented a detour from the culture of self-management in informal communities.

In 2022, the Porto Fluviale RecHouse project won the call for proposals, and the City Council of Rome received the transfer of ownership from the Ministry of Defence and 11 million euros for the planned construction work, which should begin by the end of 2023.

Lucha y Siesta fighting for recognition

On 8 March 2008, women's collective Lucha y Siesta took the decision to occupy the disused Cecafo station on Rome's Via Lucio Sestio, abandoned for 15 years by Rome's public transport operator Atac. The collective set up a self-managed transfeminist political space to welcome and house women, the first of its kind in the city. Rome has very few shelters for women victims of physical, psychological, and economic violence. Those that it does have are often located far from the city centre, employ very restrictive reception criteria, and do not provide care for more than six months.

At the house run by Lucha y Siesta, women can be accommodated for up to three years and receive psychological, legal, and professional support from volunteers. Residents have their own keys and look after each other, without cameras or timetables, breaking with traditional patterns of violence. Self-management, solidarity, and emancipation are at the heart of the Lucha y Siesta project.

With its 14 rooms, the collective increased Rome's accommodation capacity for women at risk of violence by 50 per cent and has saved its administration over six million euros since its creation. Lucha y Siesta has become a key player, at times directly called upon by the authorities to provide emergency shelter. Since 2016, the collective has also provided assistance at municipal reception centres at the request of the city council. Today, some twenty Lucha y Siesta activists work full- or part-time for the municipality, managing, among other projects, the 7th municipality's semi-independent living facility.

Although the value of Lucha y Siesta is still not officially recognised by the public authorities, years of experience and work in service of the community, multiple mobilisations, and the drafting of the declaration of self-government have established the legitimacy of the collective, which is helping to build a new urban imaginary of living together.

In 2018, the property occupied by Lucha y Siesta was put up for auction. To prevent this from spelling the end of the project, citizens were widely mobilised. The EU Parliament's Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality wrote an official letter to the Italian government, and a fundraising committee baptised "Lucha alla Città" ("Lucha to the City") was set up to spearhead a campaign to buy back the house.

At this point, Lucha y Siesta had already made several unsuccessful attempts to legalise its occupation.

Negotiations with the Lazio region were rekindled in the context of the crisis situation. Inspired by the experiences of the *beni comuni* in Naples, the collective drew up a declaration of community self-government in order to obtain public recognition of its self-management, transfeminist, ecological, solidarity-based, and social values; this document formed the basis for discussions.

The regional council, governed by the centre-left Partito Democratico (Democratic Party), finally voted to buy back the premises and agreed to recognise the collective and its self-governance, making the Lucha y Siesta house the first transfeminist common in Rome. However, when the far-right Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy) party came to power in the region six months later, the recognition process was rescinded. Although the value of Lucha y Siesta is still not officially recognised by the public authorities, years of experience and work in service of the community, multiple mobilisations, and the drafting of the declaration of self-government have established the legitimacy of the collective, which is helping to build a new urban imaginary of living together.



In a gap year in the middle of her Master's degree in ecology "Societies and Biodiversity", Cléa is involved in social and ecological issues. She is active in LUPA at Sorbonne University and participated in the People's Summit for Climate Justice in Glasgow during the COP26. She also contributes to the citizen project "La Route en Communes" which focuses on the municipal level.



After studying geology, Hugo did a master's degree in economics with a specialization in renewable energies. He has been involved in a student representative association, working on the integration of climate issues in academic programs before joining the CliMates research team as a research coordinator.



As a student in ecology, she started getting involved politically within her university, before becoming interested in the local level by interviewing mayors on issues of democracy and ecology. In 2021, she attended the COP26 to learn about international negotiations. She was also part of the Relais Jeunes.

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