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JOURNAL OF THE ITALIAN SOCIETY OF CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

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Anthropology, financial expansion and its relationalities from “marginal sites”

An introduction

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ABSTRACT: In this introduction we map the tradition of thoughts and state of the art on the study of finance and financialization in relation to the anthropological Italian debate. We suggest a particular attention towards ethnographic approaches “from the margins” of finance that can help build a non unilinear and west-centric agenda for studying financial expansion also in the Italian context. Then we discuss conceptual trends on financial expansion that emerged in the international anthropological debate after the Global Financial Crisis (GFC), underlining a shift from the “double movement” analysis to the rediscovery and the reframing of relational approach. Thinking of financialization beyond the dualistic interpretative prism that sets finance against society, movement against counter movement, center against periphery we invite to conceptualize financial expansion as the result of a variety of independent but related processes which must be apprehended holistically. We consider ethnography as an opportunity to unravel the multiple spatial and temporal axes and kinds of processes that constitute financial expansion. When analyzed ethnographically, financialization seems to proceed by simultaneous movements and countermovement resulting from the confrontation among increasingly financialized subjects. This interactive practice produces attempts that, despite the power asymmetries, might result in unplanned transformative outcomes.

KEY WORDS: FINANCIALIZATION; ANTHROPOLOGY; MOVEMENT; COUNTERMOVEMENT, RELATIONALITY.



Introduction

This thematic section (TS) is an invitation to take stock of ethnographic approaches to financial expansion or, as often conceptualized in the literature, financialization¹. We hope this TS will help focus the Italian anthropological debate on connections between socio-cultural and structural dimensions of financialization and bring to the fore the importance of theorizing financial expansion from (semi)peripheral financial contexts. This perspective is not considered only as a way to compare different case studies, but as an opportunity to interrogate what constitutes finance beyond Wall Street, and which entanglements of different processes (political, social, etc.) contribute to its expansion.

The financialization process is conventionally dated back to the late '70s. Economic stagnation in the West saw the emergence of a new “pattern of accumulation in which profit making occurred increasingly through financial channels rather than through trade and commodity production” (Krippner 2005: 14). Financial services and markets expanded dramatically, accounting for an increasing share of national income. This process reshaped radically the relationship between different economic activities; market a decline of industrial production and the Fordist mode of production; and reshaped where and how states could operate (i.e. welfare, see Epstein 2005).

From this relatively confined understanding of financialization as de-industrialization, marketization, and depoliticization, the concept has been gradually expanded to describe the increasing role that finance plays in daily life. Either to access (privatized) healthcare, education, housing, retirement, or simply to build wealth that previously was guaranteed by wages, finance is increasingly a mainstay of being alive—and a key factor in shaping how citizens understand themselves in relation to others (Martin 2002).

The increasingly expansive use of the concept of financialization has pushed theorists to systematize (first) and question (later) its appropriateness. Van der Zwan (2014: 101) distinguished between macro-level approaches to financialization, focused on the transformation of capitalist accumulation or changes in macroeconomic aggregates; meso-level approaches, which addresses financialization of modern corporations and the emergence of “shareholder value” or the imperative of producing profit for shareholders;

1. This article is the result of the guest editors' joint effort. However, the sections titled *Introduction*, *Anthropology of financialization from the (Italian) semi periphery* and *The relational perspective in emerging ethnographies of financial expansion* have been written by Zaira T. Lofranco, while the sections titled *From embeddedness to the rediscovery of relational approaches* and *Our contribution* have been written by Fabio Mattioli.

and micro-level approaches, which deal with non-elite actors (e.g. individual investors, households) coping everyday with financial practices like saving and borrowing and rationalities (van der Zwan 2014). More recently, van der Zwan and fellow editors of the *Routledge Handbook of Financialization* suggested that, to overcome the risk of overgeneralizing and devaluing the usefulness of the term “financialization”, we need a multiscale analysis and a careful space-time contextualization which should lead to a (re-)conceptualization of transnational financial expansion (Mader, Mertens, van der Zwan 2020: 6).

So, what is gained, and lost, when we restrict the concept of financialization to a “core” contribution, that is rooted in Western forms of finance? And what multiple social forces should we consider, if we want to maintain an expansive view of finance in movement across both spaces, and types of human and non-human activity?

To approach these questions, we first sketch the Italian anthropological debate about financialization. Without ambition to be exhaustive, we outline gaps and opportunities to carry out an anthropology of financialization from/on quasi-marginal financial sites. Then, we propose a focus on relationships as a key ethnographic strategy to unravel financialization paths outside “financial cores”. We identify emergent anthropological trends that, by placing relationships at the core of finance, go beyond dualistic explanations that oppose finance to society. Finally, we mobilize this framework in the context of the case studies for this issue, highlighting the complex movements and counter movements of finance.

We argue that financial expansion is constituted by a variety of independent but related processes (such as depoliticization, extractivism, commodification but also social reproduction and distinction, political posturing, etc.), which must be apprehended holistically. Only under this lens, there is neither a singular core trend, nor a singular chain of actions and reactions, in Polanyian terms. Instead, the relationships that drive financial expansion constitute multiple and simultaneous movements and countermovements across different domains, which can be observed and theorized ethnographically.

Anthropology of financialization from the (Italian) semi periphery

In Italy, economic anthropology has a long tradition. The country has been a key case study for theorists of capitalism and industrialization (Blim 1990) with a sizable involvement of anthropologists working in Italy and abroad (Papa 1999; Yanagisako 2002; D’Aloisio 2003; Ghezzi 2007; Redini 2008). Yet,

historically, much less attention has been dedicated to issues of financial expansion. However, grappling with the impact of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC hereafter), a growing number of studies have been filling this gap (see for instance Fumagalli, Mezzadra 2009; Bellofiore, Vertova 2014), even though with a late and still limited involvement of anthropologists.

Most of the anthropological contributions written in response to financial crisis in Italy had been published from 2016 onwards and were stimulated by the outbreak in 2011 of the country's sovereign debt crisis or by Brexit. This limited engagement with the anthropological debate on financialization is partly explained by a tendency to consider the Italian economy as exception compared to the Anglo-American financial core. Consider, for instance, the outsized public debt that the country accumulated since World War II, well before the crisis of Fordism. Or the peculiarities of the Italian model of industrialization (Papa 2016), fueled in part by medium enterprises that are not listed on stock exchange and are often financed by small local corporate and retail banks. Or the remarkably low size of mortgages and debt in Italian households, especially when compared to the USA or Spain. These particularities led political economists and sociologists to analyze the rise of finance in Italy not as a consequence of marketization and depoliticization – but rather as a political issue, often connected to industrial policies and structural vulnerabilities.

In different analysis this has been linked to the inclusion of the country into the European Monetary Union (EMU) which led to the peripheralization of Italian industrial production (Gambarotto, Solari 2015), or to the spread of derivatives among Italian local institutions which reinforced public economy's vulnerability, losses and austerity (Lagna 2016). Another important effect of political intervention has been the changing regulation on banking that supported a set of mergers and acquisitions and transformed the existing network of local banks in big multinational banking corporations. These processes entailed the internationalization of our banking system, as well as the expansion of our banks in foreign (mainly Eastern European) markets, with the effect of increasing the sensitivity of domestic real economy to financial shocks and of diverting capitals previously channeled into local businesses (Dagnes *at al.* 2022).

These political and economic approaches did not immediately translate into anthropological studies. The first studies where Italian anthropologists tackled debt and finance explicitly were oriented by cultural and phenomenological approaches. These included cross-cultural comparisons between

witchcraft and finance/gambling in coping with the imponderable (Aime 2016) or attempts to recuperate Ernesto de Martino's horizons of crisis to explore the existential precarity resulting from economic recession (Signorelli 2016). A few finance-related theoretical reflections stemmed from critical readings of seminal works authored by key global anthropologists like Appadurai's *Banking on words* (Vereni 2016) and David Graeber's *Debt. The first 5000 years* (Aria 2012; Pavanello 2017). In his introduction to the Italian translation of Appadurai's book, Vereni supports an approach to the study of derivatives focused on symbolic and semiotic reading of the economic practices expressed by classical voices in social sciences like Weber, Durkheim, Mauss, deemed more in tune with Italian cultural anthropological tradition. The author considers compelling these solid references to grasp risks and uncertainties caused by financialization. Aria (2012), on the contrary, acknowledges the limitations of a Graeberian approach to debt in the overgeneralizations brought about by the long-time historical frame adopted. Finally, he registers Graeber's divergence from recent trends in economic anthropology producing specific ethnographies of financial elites, enterprises, and multinational corporations which give an account of what he defines "structural difficulties of the contemporary economic model".

Increasingly, however, anthropologists working in Italy have demonstrated an interest in interaction between cultural, social, and structural approaches. A few of them elaborated on the role of finance in approaching it from related themes like microcredit in the Global South (Lulli 2008; Zanutelli 2012); and in post-industrial country (Crivellaro, Guerzoni 2014; Crivellaro 2015) or analyzing deindustrialization and labor (India 2017; D'Aloisio, Ghezzi 2022) in Italy facing the crisis.

However, since Cristina Papa, in 2016, re-elaborated the concept of "finanzcapitalismo" to highlight the shift from "value production" to "value extraction" (see also Gallino 2011), a few anthropological works expanded this theoretical thread (Lofranco 2018; Lofranco, Zanutelli 2022; Carabini 2023).

Yet, ethnographies openly addressing financialization, remain rare and are born from collaborations abroad (Zanutelli 2013; Lofranco 2021; Dal Maso 2020). Most of them are recent and mainly inspired by fieldwork experiences of the tangible effect of financialization in urban spaces and housing (Lenzi Grillini 2022; Stefani 2022; Bonfanti 2022; Carpini 2022; Lofranco 2022; Portelli *at al.* 2023).

Nonetheless, the confrontation between cultural and structural aspect of financialization, appears decisive in the possibility to unfold an Italian debate on this issue. In our view, theoretically and methodologically bridging these two approaches is essential to grasp a multifaceted and pervasive phenomenon like financialization. Furthermore, we will argue that ethnographic research is crucial to situate geographically and historically these structural transformations and to understand, beyond determinism and dualism, the specific forms through which they relate to sociality and value production.

From embeddedness to the rediscovery of relational approaches

Before the Global Financial Crisis, anthropologists had understood financial expansion as a cultural and phenomenological process, affecting financial elites or “the poor” (see for instance Zaloom 2006). By 2007-08, the devastating and enduring socio-economic impact of the crisis highlighted the need for a novel approach which embraced structural issues.

To make sense of the multifaceted dimensions of indebtedness post GFC, several anthropologists contextualized finance within classical references to Mauss ([1925] 1990) and Polanyi ([1944] 2001), which articulated economics as a constitutive part of social relations. Following in Mauss footsteps, this approach involved looking retrospectively to ethnographic settings where credit and debt were part of an indissoluble dyadic unit generative of moral debates about social, political and space-time boundaries and co constitutive of their material effects (Peebles 2010). In a similar retrospective vein, David Graeber (2011) elaborated his famous treatise on the cultural history of debt. Engaging in a long diachronic analysis, he showed that it is precisely when institutionalized and financialized logics infiltrate social life and abstract it from its relational component that violence of debt’s extractive practices escalates. The actualization of Karl Polanyi’s work has been linked to his critical view on a self-regulated market that inspired liberal economic theory elaborated after the Great Depression of 1929. Polanyi’s reflections were recuperated to understand the continuities in the passage *From the Great Transformation to the Great financialization* (Polanyi Levitt 2013). The concept of three “fictitious commodities” – land, labor and money – seemed particularly useful to shed light on the ongoing debt crisis and to highlight the need to re-embed economics into society – at the crossroad of local and global processes (Hart, Ortiz 2014). Similarly, Karl Polanyi’s attempt to understand the history of cap-

italism as a result of a “double movement” has appeared particularly reliable also for investigating global financial expansion and its social backlash since the '70s (Atzmüller *et al.* 2019; Mikuš 2019). Notoriously, within the double movement explicative framework, “movements” of expanding commodification and marketisation are opposed by “countermovements” through which society seeks “protection” from market dynamics (Polanyi 2001: 138).

These early attempts to understand the crisis by re-theorizing debt anthropologically were successful in challenging economists’ intellectual hegemony in the world of finance but were less accurate in addressing the specificities of financialized capitalism (Lofranco 2018). As other contributions suggested, Mauss and Polanyi’s works need to be recontextualized to deconstruct the dualistic relations between finance and real economy (Hart, Ortiz 2008). Under financial capitalism, money and finance, distributed unequally in local and global context, constitute an “integral part of society rather than semi-detached from it” (Hart, Ortiz 2008: 1). In other words, thinking about embeddedness in relation to debt and the GFC analysis should be subordinated to the task of considering the “social consequences of political economy and the way it is understood by those who make it, as one and the same social process” (Hart, Ortiz 2008: 3). Nevertheless, in neoliberal capitalism the universal heuristic validity of the double movement has been challenged by scholars who observed that the image of finance as a fictitious commodity depicted finance and society as separated spheres dominated by contrasting logics, while “finance is no less embedded in society than any other social tie” (Pittluck *et al.* 2008: 7). If so, can we still talk about a singular movement and counter movement, as if finance was driven by a singular logic?

Although Mauss and Polanyi continue to be essential references to understand contemporary financial dynamics, these shortcomings have increasingly pushed anthropologists to embrace relational analyses, drawing eclectically from Marxist sources. Historically, the Marxist tradition has described financial expansion as a process of abstraction that transforms the purposes and functioning of monetary credit, enabling an additional appropriation of surplus compared to classic industrial capitalism (see Fine 2013: 53). In this view, the problem is not monetary credit or debt per se. Under advanced capitalism, however, the expansion of financial markets transforms monetary credit into a speculative tool geared towards maximizing returns for investors, rather than enabling distributed purchases.

In Marxist analysis of history, this transformation of credit is the consequence of falling rates of profit, understood as a driving logic within capitalism. The copious literature on the subject (Moseley 1991; Hodgson 1974) acknowledge that capitalism is founded on competition. Over time, competition drives down prices and profit margins, forcing capital owners and investors to cut salaries. This undercuts the spending power of consumers ultimately causing crises of overproduction. To avoid this double bind, capital owners can look for new avenues to sell their goods and accumulate profits. This can mean enlisting state bureaucrats and supporting imperial projects aimed at opening new markets through military domination (Luxemburg 1960; Arrighi 1994). Or it can mean branching into new domains of activity such as urban construction, and ultimately its financing, as observed since the 1960s in the Western world (Aalbers 2008; Harvey 1982).

During and after the GFC, anthropologists increasingly drew from these Marxist analyses to explain the housing shock and, more expansively, the expropriative dimensions of finance. This process of re-discovery proved productive, as it allowed anthropologists a certain intellectual freedom to experiment and mix scholarly traditions — for instance mixing Marxian, Polanyian, Schumpeterian and Keynesian approaches to move beyond the separation between economic and social activity (Kalb 2020). Or, mixing critical and semiotic approaches to the world of financiers to discuss how inequality is both created and justified (Souleles 2019; 2017). Overall, anthropologists who adopted Marxist-adjacent, relational approaches, tended to explore two key issues.

First, a focus on relationality allowed anthropologists to highlight political dimensions of finance. Inspired by E. P. Thompson (1963) or Arrighi (1994), anthropologists detailed the politics that embedded class conflicts within financial expansion. Typically, this involved mapping the material, moral, and existential lives of blue-collar workers under financialization (Mollona 2009; Kofti 2016; Palomera, Vetta 2016). But it also meant analyzing the patchwork dimensions of state deregulation in arenas such as migration, banking, welfare (Rajković 2018; Lofranco 2021) that not only forced workers to supplement income with debts, but also generated new vulnerabilities—and informal spaces of subprime lending exploited by entrepreneurial brokers (Palomera 2014). The institutional contradiction promoted by financial expansion generate messy bureaucratic and everyday interactions, which, in some cases, offered fertile ground for the resurgence of authoritarian (Mattioli 2020), illiberal (Bakic-Hayden, Muir 2022), nationalist (Mikus 2019; Nunez 2023), imperial

(Schuster, Kar 2022) and crypto-fascist state tendencies (Maskovsky, Bjork James 2019) – as well as a variety of anti-austerity, solidarity, or dignity-based movements (Franquesa 2016).

The second trend amongst Marxist-inspired relational approaches focused on the historical process of building households in a context where one's place in the world was not only uncertain, but often, collapsing (Narotzky 2016; Begim 2018). These contributions highlighted how financial expansion supercharged the power dynamics within and against households, increasingly experienced as both an object and a site of power (Mikus, Rodik 2021). Thinking about households and financial expansion allowed anthropological contributions to shed light on the “domestication” of finance into pre-existing social relations and values (Pellandini-Simáni 2015; Mikuš 2021). Intersecting with logics of trusts and kinship (Lofranco 2021; Sabatè 2021), the mingling of finance with the domestic sphere generated new tensions across current family groups. But it also fractured the strategic repertoire that allowed citizens to inscribe their existential trajectory within larger social groupings – families, class, nations (Mateescu, Kalb forthcoming). Here, financial debt and credit are often equated to formal, bank-centric channels and transactions which, over time, penetrate local communities, fostering local counter reactions (Mikuš 2019) or allowing commodified forms of violence to infiltrate existing relationships (see Palomera 2014).

The relational perspective in emerging ethnographies of financial expansion

In the past decade, Marxist-adjacent approaches have brought relationality to the fore. However, newest ethnographies of financialization contributed to re-focusing the relational approach, and ultimately the relation between finance and society, on the peculiar and changing dynamics of financial expansion in globalized capitalism.

Many works have increasingly embraced a “generative” approach to financial capitalism. Systematized by Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako in their *Gens: A feminist manifesto for the study of capitalism* (2015), this “feminist substantivist approach to the socio-economic” (Bear *et al.* 2015, 2023) challenges the assumption that “non-capitalist” institutions (like household, kinship) are radically different in their forms of sociality from the world of the market, including financial markets. Capitalism should not be considered a determining structure, logic and trajectory over other forms of sociality. Systemic and structural analyses should contemplate

not only explicit economic practices guided by the goal of accumulating and distributing capital, but multiple divergent life and productive projects which can lead to heterogeneous and unexpected results in terms of social hierarchies. These, in turn, can generate a variety of financial forms, which can serve different purposes and mutate over time.

In rethinking the generative dimensions of finance, speculation emerges as a key organizing concept as it has been extended to the wider population by the sale of various financial products and credit instruments (Weiss 2015, 2018). As a new form of labor, speculation is not just a type of alienation, or domination. Instead, it performs a social task similar to divination or magic as “we speculate by using various technologies of imagination [...] deployed to anticipate the future; to stimulate its emergence; and to control it” (Bear 2020: 8). As Bear remarks, the ability to accumulate capital through speculative labor is unevenly distributed as “nodal institutions”, global forms and contracts (e.g. between the State and the market) organize speculation and give direction to the accumulation of surplus value.

A second key trend within the emerging ethnographies of financialization is the re-working of the relation between sociality and morality. Works that discuss the emergence of “social finance” showed how, instead of re-embedding the market into society, a broader “moral turn in finance” has tended to anchor the social in the market logic (Langely 2020: 131). To develop this point, scholars have reflected on the increasing application after GFC of the valuation technique that considers the Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) impact of investments. Leins (2020) has explained that promoting “responsible investment”, non-financial factors (such as moral concerns) are used to support speculative investment narratives in a way that broader social and ethical implications remain subordinated to the primary goal of profit-making.

Dissecting the narratives and the practices of “moral” finance at the time of Covid19 pandemic, a group of ethnographers engaged within the project “the Hau of finance”² proposed a novel approach to rethink early Maussian reading of the debt crisis as structural and expansive features of contemporary financial capitalism. In their readings, social impact finance not only appears regulated by a complex intersection between gift-giving and financial returns, but it is able to promote an unprecedented shift in the frontier between the

2. “The Hau of finance: Impact investing and the globalization of social and environmental sustainability”, is an ERC funded research project led by the anthropologist Marc Brightman (<https://site.unibo.it/impact-hau-finance/en>).

public and private. Notably, drawing from the relational approach (Dal Maso *et al.* 2022: 3), the analysis of the “moral turn” sheds new light on the reconfiguration between the state and finance nexus. This form of “intersectionality” between the state and the realm of sustainable finance, is signaled by the extensive emission of green bonds. As argued, this post-Covid financial products constitute a remarkable shift in the modus operandi of the private sector which used to treat society and environment as external fields to capital and market activity (Dal Maso *et al.* 2022: 6). Financial “value” is increasingly linked to the sustainability of cheap and disposable resources like food, energy and raw material. This growing ubiquity of financial extraction makes it extremely difficult to distinguish between material and financial expansion — a perspective that brings novel life to the work of Arrighi, Luxemburg, and other critical scholars (see above).

Significantly, other recent anthropological contributions documenting the financialization process and its upswing have introduced alternative perspectives on its spaces and scale of analysis. However, this did not simply end up in ethnographies of financial expansion and financial crisis from the (semi) periphery. Instead, they frame their insights in a renewed perspective of “geographical relationality”.

In their essay on the “Subprime empire” Caroline Schuster and Sohini Kar and deconstruct the same conceptualization of financial “core” and “periphery” (Schuster, Kar 2021). Drawing from a comparative observation of the microfinance sector in India and Paraguay, they document how the massive sale of subprime loans to precarious workforce in the Global North and the steep rise of microfinance industry in the Global South are two sides of the same process of extraction of debt capital from poor households. As they show, this profit-making model increasingly marks global banking and reshuffles the typical colonialist polarization between a North pooling capital and a South transformed into a site of extraction. Positioning themselves “in-between” these spaces, Kar and Shuster advance a multiscale analysis that demonstrates how expansion of financial capital is not a top-down process that simply includes the unbankables of the poorest countries. Instead, financialization relies on a work of mediation and translation of finance’s abstract imperatives into relations and understanding of people’s social worlds.

Dealing ethnographically with the functioning of the big business of remittances and digital wallets in Nigeria, Janet Roitmann has similarly questioned the usefulness of a concept of financial inclusion that proceeds from North to

South. According to Roitman this common vectorial understanding of financial expansion denies the complexity and heterogeneity of contexts, subjects and institutions involved. Worst, it does not contemplate instances of failure for a straightforward process of financial inclusion of people in the global South that are thought to behave according to predefined interests and strategies (Roitman 2023).

In recent anthropological literature alternative perspectives on financial expansions have been paired with new takes on the spread of the financial crisis. In his ethnography of financialization in Macedonia, Fabio Mattioli (2023) basically reverses the common belief of the domino effect by which the 2008 crisis propagated from the United States to the rest of the capitalist world. Looking at the GFC from this peripheral country that routinely experiences economic and political crisis since the decline of socialist Yugoslavia, Mattioli shows that the GFC has not been considered a major disruptive event. As Mattioli observes, in an already “failed economy”, the GFC just served as another reconfiguration of power that strengthened new elites through increasingly oppressive relations of financial (inter)dependence.

Our contribution

The emerging literature on the relationality of finance is pushing anthropologists to rethink key global economic assumptions. Instead of seeing financial expansion as a homogenizing process or an oppositional dynamic of movement and countermovement, core and periphery, presence and absence, financialization is increasingly understood as an emergent property of unequally distributed powers and contested set of relations. It is this conceptual and methodological approach, that constitutes the red thread of this TS. Differentiated by their geographical focus, the scale of the analysis, and the subjects involved, the pieces destabilize the commonly accepted idea of how finance moves in space and time, articulating the importance of ethnographic analysis in understanding the relational bundles and the contradictory actions and reactions that enable finance to expand. Looking at these expansive and intrinsically relational dynamics from three marginal financial locations, the articles make the social, cultural, political complexity of this process even more evident.

Based on ethnographic research in Italy, Dagnes’ contribution analyzes the strategic moves of “critical and active shareholders”, a group of citizens who mobilize ownership of financial instruments to push forward progressive

agendas. Through an ethnography of shareholder meetings, documents, and calls, she offers an account “from within” of the limits to financialization and value extraction of stock-listed companies. Here, critical shareholding can be interpreted “as an emerging and unexpected effect of financialization”. It is made possible by the same market economy and the process of financialization which relies upon the principle of shareholder value. And yet, it mobilizes these economic tools to reach different political goals. In other words, the centrality of the stock market becomes a political arena, mobilized to generate dialectical relationships between financial actors and society. Seen ethnographically, critical shareholding fragments the homogeneity of finance and of its movement. Instead, what emerges from this methodological approach is a heterogeneous set of relationships, which brings into focus the formal and informal interactions between financial actors, media, or corporations; but also the slippery slope of ethical practices in financial circles, where skilled financiers can turn oppositional ideas into business opportunities.

A similar, unexpected, contraposition between different forces is at the heart of Sabatè's contribution. Here the focus is on the role of the Spanish State in stimulating, or preventing, the expansion of real estate and its financial mechanisms. In particular, she addresses the centrality and contradictions in state policy and regulations of financial processes. As she demonstrates, it is the combination of these policies and financial processes that cause the current housing crisis in Spain. As she concludes, “states should not be understood as outsiders with respect to finance, as, to the contrary, they are part of finance's very conditions of possibility”. Sabatè's analysis demonstrates the powerful analytical purchase of combining ethnographic insights with contextual analysis of documents, legal proceedings, and archival material. Her work highlights the importance of excavating a multiplicity of leads, agencies, and facets of “the state.” More importantly, she highlights the crucial role of failures, delays and ineffective measures. These deficiencies (for instance to enforce right-based legislation), are not, however, symptoms of a state's intrinsic incapability to act. Instead, Sabatè argues that inaction is very much a political strategy aimed at generating specific economic outcomes — a strategy that is vehemently opposed by leftist movements, also by mobilizing specific political regulations and processes. It is only from analyzing the assemblage of these different, contradictory, data sources, movements, and countermovements, that we can reconstruct a chronology of financial relationships.

Richards, Sellers, and Mattioli take the analysis of financial expansion to the world of startups and innovation. Through an ethnographic journey with startup founders in Australia, a wealthy country that aims at becoming a new Silicon powerhouse and overcome its colonial past, they detail how startups are encouraged to present themselves as disruptive to gain financial funding from Venture Capitalists (VCs); and yet, these same financial considerations push startups to avoid actual transformative innovation (as too expensive, and often unappealing to investors). Through their operations, VCs seem to cast “disruption” as a simply rhetorical device largely disconnected from actual innovation. At the same time, the complex maneuvers that founders have to undertake trigger profound personal transformations, which they resist by deploying gendered tactics. The contribution thinks through what disruption means vis-à-vis established economic practices—and how it reflects a patchy transformational approach to the social relations that structure the contemporary relations of finance.

Methodologically, all the contributions are held together by an angle of observation that holistically catches the relational aspects of financial expansion declined in their interactive, dynamic and above all transformative features. Positioning themselves at the point of interaction among simultaneous movements and countermovements, the articles show that the expansion of financial capital proceeds by the confrontation among increasingly financialized subjects (the State and households; shareholders and critical shareholders; startups and VC). Such an interactive practice encompasses clashes but also inaction, pretense, tactical moves, negotiations, performances. It produces attempts that, despite the power asymmetries, might result in new and unplanned outcomes. In this framework, the articles offer an ethnographic account of financial expansion and of its possibility to transform and to be transformed. Overall, they outline a path to do an anthropology of financialization from Italy or other countries situated at the margins of the global financial system, where finance might involve different economic sectors or subjects and might be manifested through variegated financial processes and products. This pushes to look empirically for the combination of different economic, social relations (remittances, forced credit, informal lending, etc.) and cultural values through which finance expand. Crucially, ethnography from the margin can document how financialized relations and their hierarchies of power can be questioned and eventually recasted.

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Bringing dissent to shareholders' meetings

An investigation into critical shareholding

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with critical shareholding, that is, the action of non-profit organizations that resorts to involvement in corporate ownership as shareholders to promote socially responsible corporate behaviours. Based on the combined use of sociological and anthropological tools, I focus on the attendance of annual general meetings (AGMs) as a gateway to understand the potential and the limits of the transformative power of marginal actors in investment capitalism. My findings suggest that confrontation through share ownership exerts transformative pressures not only on companies but also on activist organizations, which over time are called to redefine their skills, actions and intervention logic to pursue their goals more effectively and report them to their stakeholders. Thus, the analysis of the phenomenon reveals the dialectical nature of the processes that take place in and around the AGM, giving them a place in the complex dynamics of movements and countermovements of finance and their mutual relationship.

KEYWORDS: CRITICAL SHAREHOLDING; ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING; SOCIAL MOVEMENTS; FINANCE; MEETING ETHNOGRAPHY



Introduction

The 2019 annual general meeting (AGM) of one of the main Italian banking groups takes place in the auditorium of a large skyscraper in the centre of Milan, lasting from 10am to 5pm. The first hour of the meeting is taken up by the initial communications from the chairman and the presentation of the annual financial statements by the Ceo, while the last hour is occupied by the voting operations: excluding a short lunch break, all the rest of the meeting time is dedicated to questions from shareholders. There are around 30 speeches, all coming from small shareholders owning a very limited number of shares, from a few units to a few thousand each. Overall, the value of the shares held by those taking the floor amounted to 0.001% of the value of the shares represented at the meeting.

Although some questions are provocative – while others, conversely, are flattering towards the management – the atmosphere always remains cordial. Small private shareholders show mutual knowledge, commenting together on the different speeches, and the responses and reactions of the management are friendly, even when the tones of the interveners are colourful. In some cases, they put on somewhat of a show: someone jokingly refers to the speeches given in previous years, someone else is moved by remembering how pleasant it is to meet in person once a year, there are some requests – kindly refused by the chairman – to pose for a selfie together. Although this is an official meeting, the impression is that the economic and financial issues raised by the shareholders are often more like a pretext to conquer the stage, playing an assigned role. The small investors who take the floor are likely looking for visibility, and the management seems to be patiently lending it to them for a day, while waiting to go back to dealing with more serious issues already discussed in other meetings with the investors who matter (see Roberts *et al.* 2006; Birds *et al.* 2019).

During the AGM, this friendly atmosphere is abruptly broken off in a single moment, after three speeches in a row raise the issue of climate change and, in detail, the bank's financing of the fossil fuel industry. The first to intervene is the representative of an association carrying out campaigns against corruption and environmental destruction, which owns no. 5 shares in the bank, for a total value of approximately 60 euros. He complains that the company's climate change policy is unclear and that, despite the promises of internal auditing, the bank is financing highly polluting coal plants with a serious impact in Turkey. Then speaks the Czech representative of a European network

of non-profit associations whose aim is to stamp out the use of coal. He takes the floor as a delegate of an Italian shareholder who also owns no. 5 shares and belongs to the same association as the first speaker. He denounces the loans granted by the bank to highly polluting plants in the Czech Republic and other Eastern European countries, and brings the financial and reputational risks associated with this business to the attention of the other shareholders. Finally, it is the turn of an English shareholder, who owns only one share – for a value of about 12 euros – and represents an international organization focused on the activities that banks finance. In her speech, she stresses the inadequacy of the bank's climate change policy and asks for it to be made public, as promised by the board of directors following the Paris Agreement in 2015.

When it is the bank's turn to respond, the tones are anything but cordial. After a general reassurance from the president about the company's environmental awareness, the CEO takes the floor – and this is the only case in which he intervenes directly in the discussion with the shareholders. Quite vehemently, he argues that it would be appropriate to talk about hard facts, and the hard facts say that his bank is among those least involved in financing fossil fuels. He then highlights the corporate commitment to financing renewable energy and various environmentally sustainable projects in which the bank is involved, presenting them as “facts that speak for themselves”. Finally, he mentions some social responsibility initiatives – financial education for children and microcredit for small firms – which seem to have little to do with the critical remarks raised by the shareholders, but which in his opinion “testify to the bank's all-round commitment to sustainability” and make clear the application of the corporate principle to “do the right thing”.

Meanwhile, during the questions-and-answers session, some demonstrators have organized a “Fossil Banks, no thanks!” picket in front of the stock exchange headquarters where the assembly is being held. Being in the hall, I only hear a confused buzz and a few screams, but the next day the main specialized media would report the news of the events, describing the meeting as a “not calm” and “disturbed” situation, and giving great prominence to the protests.

The above is an example of shareholder engagement, that is, a form of activism that resorts to involvement in corporate ownership as shareholders to promote socially responsible corporate behaviours (Fleming, Spicer 2007; Dimson, Karakas, Li 2015). Specifically, the example given can be labelled as critical shareholding, indicating the action of non-profit organizations that

acquire a minimum number of shares in listed companies with a bad Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) assessment in order to attend the AGM and make requests for change (Meggiolaro 2019).

The capital market makes it possible to acquire ownership shares and therefore to influence corporate decisions, at least potentially, hence the phenomenon of critical shareholding arises. This trend can be interpreted as an emerging and unexpected effect of financialization, meant as the new pattern of accumulation that started to appear in the 1970s along with the increasing salience of finance, rather than production, in the economy (Krippner 2005). For non-financial corporations, the financialization process involves a growing share of profit deriving from financial activities and, at the same time, the distribution of productivity gains to the shareholders, rather than their reinvestment in the company (van der Zwan 2014). This shift has led over time, albeit in a non-linear way, to an overall change in corporate behaviour, with the affirmation of the managerial principle of shareholder value and the alignment of investors and executives' interests, thanks to the growing weight of managers' remuneration in stock options (Froud *et al.* 2000). In this process, financialization has particularly empowered those types of investors having a great deal of highly liquid assets and short-term orientation, which are thus now able to exert significant influence on the management direction in order to pursue profit extraction. The phenomenon is now referred to as investor capitalism, indicating the increasingly predominant role of institutional investors, such as mutual funds, pensions and insurance companies (Useem 1996).

The centrality of the stock market, however, can also give rise to a dialectical relationship between the financial actors and society, defining arenas where market and non-market actors bearing different interests come face to face and possibly clash, contrasting what is priced and what is not. Far from the concept of finance as a vehicle for the quantitative homogenization of value (see Zelizer 1994), in critical shareholding the share ownership is exclusively symbolic and the objectives pursued by the activists diverge from the corporate ones, creating an oppositional relationship. In other words, critical shareholding places the expansion of finance at the centre of its action, transforming it into a tool to leverage the orientation of shareholders and managers from within corporations and, thereby, to influence the complex relationship between society and the market in this era of financialization.

In this article I will focus on these dynamics, interpreting them as a counter-movement of finance. Specifically, I will investigate the conditions under which critical shareholding can generate a change in the orientation of actors and organizations, company policies and daily practices. To do so, I will use AGMs as the gateway to observe, understand and interpret the action of the subjects involved. The research is based on original empirical material consisting of: i) analysis of the AGM documentation officially made available by companies (in particular preparatory materials and minutes of the meetings); ii) 14 semi-structured interviews with company chairs and directors, investor relations division officers, investment fund representatives, individual shareholders and activists belonging to non-profit organizations;¹ and iii) ethnography conducted on three AGMs in April, May and October 2019.

While documentary research and interviews with key informants – both internal and external to companies – are fairly common methods of investigating corporate structure, attention to attendance of AGMs is relatively rare in sociology. However, according to the studies that have used participant observation in corporate meetings, it has undoubted advantages, such as a greater focus on the formal and informal interaction between actors, as well as the possibility of retracing the dominant corporate narrative and the alternative narratives proposed by other subjects (Carrington, Johed 2007). In other words, through an ethnographic approach borrowed from the anthropological study of political assemblies (Abélès 2000) and of corporations (Apostolides, Boden 2005) it is possible to reach a “thick description” of AGMs (see Geertz 1997), tracing material practices and discursive strategies grounded in specific corporate realities (Dolan, Rajak 2016). Thus, data triangulation is crucial (see Olsen 2004; Olivier de Sardan 1995): through ethnography the minutes of the AGMs can be enriched with notes on forms of soft power, as well as on informal exchanges that take place on the sidelines – for example, during breaks and downtime – and to capture exchanges of looks, tones of voice and gestures. Furthermore, the interviews reveal the actors’ point of view on these exchange dynamics and allow reconstruction of the history and effects of previous interactions, placing them in the organizations’ “real-life” experience (Carrington, Johed 2007: 708).

1. In detail, the interviews were carried out with three activists belonging to non-profit organizations; two chairmen and a CEO of listed companies; two investor relations managers of listed companies; a representative of an international investment fund; and five small shareholders who regularly participate in shareholders’ meetings. All interviews were conducted in person, were recorded and lasted between 40 minutes and two hours.

This contamination between different methods of investigation has not only a methodological value, but a heuristic one too. The combined use of sociological and anthropological tools allows to reconstruct the arena of contradictory relationships between corporate actors and activists when dealing with the (in)compatibility of financial and social values (Dolan, Rajak 2016), and to analyse how unprecedented domains of corporate power can emerge from this relational arena (Apostolides, Boden 2005). Specifically, the ethnographic scrutiny of companies – and of the specific *device* of AGMs – focuses on how discourses and practices (e.g., management of the discussion and the attribution of legitimacy to the issues that emerge) can shape new corporate set-ups, displaying a subtle balance between compliance and concealment, ritualized and/or enacted by multiple actors (Dolan, Rajak 2016). As we will see, this dynamic weakens the boundaries between corporations and society, giving rise to a specific form of countermovement in finance.

In this article, the issue of blurred boundaries is also relevant from a theoretical and analytical perspective. As many authors argue (see Pitluck, Mattioli, Souleles 2018; Souleles 2020) economic anthropology is by definition interdisciplinary, and its vitality is connected precisely to its ability to bring together theoretical frames, analytical tools and methodological approaches from different disciplines (i.e. anthropology, sociology, political economy, heterodox economy). Consistently with this view, my analytical starting point is drawn from the neo-institutionalist approach in sociology, according to which to understand organizational change – as well as the attempts to generate it – it is not sufficient to focus on the single organization, but reference needs to be made to a composite system of organizations able to influence each other. In this regard, it is useful to introduce the concept of organizational field, defined as “sets of organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life” (DiMaggio, Powell 1983: 148), namely the group of relevant actors in a certain field of activity. Although the AGM is not an organizational field in itself, it allows us to observe a commonly hidden portion of the field where interaction between stakeholders with conflicting interests takes place. Two aspects of the neo-institutionalist approach are particularly useful here. They are: i) the emphasis on the cognitive, cultural and political dimension of institutions, that is, the role of prevailing interpretative models in guiding action within organizations (Zukin, DiMaggio 1990), in this specific case meaning that the AGM can be seen as one of the sites where stakeholders struggle either to establish new cultural frames or to maintain existing ones;

ii) considering the organizational field as a context of mutual constraints and influences: inside the field, it is not possible to clearly distinguish between the organizations exerting pressure to change and those that are pressured, since the interaction within the field is reciprocal and leads to a change for all the actors involved. What is more, this ongoing overall change favours the process of mutual legitimation rather than jeopardization of the institutions at stake (Meyer, Rowan 1977). The emphasis on the interpretative frames is consistent with the approach of anthropological studies on social movements, according to which socio-cultural factors influence both protesters and their counterparts, sometimes in an unexpected way even for the subjects implementing collective actions (Salman, Assies 2017). More generally, my work is in dialogue with the contributions of economic anthropologists who emphasize the political dimension of financial processes in relation to complex institutional settings (see Abélès 2000; Mattioli 2020; Ortiz 2021).

Consistently with these principles, my hypothesis concerning the critical shareholding phenomenon is that confrontation through share ownership exerts transformative pressures not only on companies but also on activist organizations, intended as a form of collective action, which over time are called to redefine their skills, actions and intervention logic to pursue their goals more effectively and report them to their stakeholders. In testing this hypothesis through empirical material, it will also be important to consider the imbalance of power between the subjects involved and the risks of manipulation of one towards the other. The analysis will therefore adopt a twofold perspective, focusing on the changes in both the target companies and the critical organizations.

The article proceeds as follows. In the next section, I will introduce the analytical background for the study of the critical shareholding phenomenon. I will then briefly describe its origin and development in Italy, focusing on the experience of the main activist organizations. Afterwards, I will present and discuss my empirical findings in two sections, dedicated to activist organizations and target companies respectively. Broader suggestions about the social and analytical implications of my findings will be provided in the concluding section.

Attending the AGM, taking the floor, protesting

The AGM, meant as a site of confrontation between shareholders and management, gives the plastic representation of the relationship between ownership and control in corporations.

According to the literature, the AGM performs three main functions: i) it provides shareholders with information about the company's economic and financial performance (communication); ii) it ensures that shareholders express their consent on operations proposed by the management (legal formality); and iii) it offers a forum for discussion between shareholders and managers (accountability) (Strätling 2003).² While in the first two functions the management prevails, in the third the shareholders can be protagonists, regardless of the number of shares they hold. In fact, in most corporate legal systems, even those who own only one share can attend the AGM and ask questions, demanding the managers' accountability in running the company. In other words, thanks to its third function, the AGM could be conceived as a device to keep under control the principal-agent conflict between shareholders and management (Carrington, Johed 2007). Namely, it is the situation in which the shareholders (the principal) delegate functions and power to the management (the agent) to run the company, while exposed to the risk of opportunistic behaviours: in fact, management can take advantage of the asymmetry of information existing between the parties and not to stubbornly pursue profit maximization, which is the primary interest of company owners (Jensen, Meckling 1976).

However, this perspective is partially questioned by those who point out that for the most part AGMs are deserted by the major and institutional investors, who usually attend other meetings arranged specifically for them⁵ (De Jong, Mertens, Roosenboom 2006; Roberts *et al.* 2006). Research has shown that raising a question during the AGM is a last resort for high-level investors:⁴ their ability to influence corporate decisions, combined with the desire not to damage the reputation of the company in which they have invested, makes them opt for informal consultations with the management (Short, Keasey 1999; Strätling 2003; Birds *et al.* 2019). Indeed, institutional investors

2. Some studies highlight the ritual dimension of AGMs which also emerges in the performance of their functions, whose aim is to legitimize the management over the company by making the existing power structures visible (Hodges, Macniven, Mellet 2004; Nyqvist 2015). Even the criticisms – which often take on a ritual dimension too – are functional to strengthening the construction of facts and trust (Catasús, Johed 2007).
3. This point is also confirmed by a Chairman I interviewed: “there is no international institution that participates, that is, there is no large fund, no one shows up at the AGM, everyone says ‘I’ll come to talk to you separately’” (Chairman, int. LC3).
4. An investor relations manager interviewed clearly illustrates this point: “The AGM is the place where chickens come home to roost, but only if these chickens haven’t been eaten before in one-to-one meetings” (Investor relations manager, int. LC5).

“clearly preferred not to ‘waste’ time by attending annual general meetings (AGMs) and considered that they could perform their active voting function perfectly well without such attendance” (Solomon *et al.* 2000: 220).

The result is that it is very rare to meet major investors at AGMs. Meetings are usually only attended by a few small private shareholders, who participate for various reasons, including the sense of belonging to the company, the quest for a speakers’ corner and the political will to promote their own causes (Strätling 2003; Apostolides, Boden 2005). This is also true in the Italian case: in the three AGMs in which I took part, the number of shareholders in the hall ranged from approximately 30 to 80 and was made up almost exclusively of individual investors.

In the last two decades, AGMs have increasingly become physical sites for protest, as well as for demanding accountability, precisely because of their characteristics: they are easily accessible (in most countries even one share is enough to have the right to attend and to speak); they allow direct interaction with the top management, which is required to answer the questions posed; they guarantee high visibility and publicity, due to the media coverage. In other words, critical shareholding transforms AGMs into a place where a particular *voce* is exercised: while not leading to an immediate change in business approach, it can nevertheless have a strong impact on the proceedings of the AGM itself, as well as possible repercussions on the direction of expansion of financial capital in non-financial corporations (Goodman *et al.* 2014). Widespread sensitivity to possible scandals related to corporate responsibility in the environmental and social fields and the awareness of their media resonance lead companies to devote a lot of energy on the one hand to preparing the appropriate responses to the critical issues raised (Apostolides, Boden 2005) and on the other hand to trying to weaken the impact of critical shareholding on the AGM and the other investors (Hadani, Doh, Schneider 2018).

The dynamics triggered by critical shareholding have so far been given little attention in the literature, with the partial exception of social movement scholars (see Waeger, Mena 2019). The focus is in particular on the potential that social campaigns have in “moralizing” companies and the entire economic system (Arjaliès 2010), through the analysis of what has been defined as “private politics” (Soule 2012). Following Waeger and Mena (2019), we can distinguish two main types of studies in this area: the first concentrates on activists and the conditions under which they can mobilize tangible and intangible resources – such as money, specialist knowledge and relational net-

works – to advance their cause; the second focuses on the target companies, investigating their characteristics and reactions to the campaigns promoted by social activists. Although these contributions offer a promising analytical background, they show a twofold limit: i) they tend to treat activists and target companies separately, thus failing to see the interplay of reciprocal influences between them; ii) they lack a situated perspective, dealing with different forms of activism within the same analytical framework, such as social campaigns, boycott campaigns and various forms of shareholder engagement. This article aims to fill this gap by focusing specifically on the phenomenon of critical shareholding in Italy.

The roots of critical shareholding can be traced back to some broader forms of shareholder engagement that emerged in the USA at the beginning of the 1970s, when a coalition of religious groups – the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility (ICCR) – began to participate in the AGMs of large American companies to protest against their investments in apartheid South Africa. The path chosen was the presentation of shareholder resolutions, which in the event of approval would bind the company to divest. Although no resolution was approved until 2018,⁵ this engagement influenced the companies' investment policies; meanwhile, the ICCR evolved into a partnership of active shareholder funds that currently manage approximately \$ 400 billion in assets (Meggiolaro 2019).

Following the ICCR experience, but having to deal with the different European legislation on shareholder resolutions,⁶ starting from the end of the 1980s some organizations of European activists such as the German *Dachverband der Kritischen Aktionärinnen und Aktionäre* (DKA) began to promote real critical shareholding by taking the floor in the AGMs of numerous companies and raising environmental and social issues. In the following years, other organizations adopted the same form of shareholder engagement, giving life to a plurality of initiatives which differ from each other for the tones used (extremely aggressive, as in the case of the DKA, or based on constructive dialogue, as in the case of the Dutch *Vereniging van Beleggers voor Duurzame*

5. In 2018, with 69% of votes in favour the AGM of one of the main US arms companies approved a resolution proposed by a group of Dominican nuns, members of the ICCR, which obliges the company to monitor the episodes of violence in which its weapons are involved (Meggiolaro 2019).

6. Unlike simple participation in the AGMs, adding shareholder resolutions to the AGM agenda is only possible with certain capital requirements, in Europe usually corresponding to 5% of the share capital represented, even collectively. In Italy, the required share is 2.5%. In the USA, on the other hand, a 2,000 \$ capital is sufficient.

Ontwikkeling (VBDO)) and for the diversity of those involved (for example, the British ShareAction, created in 2005, includes trade unions, environmental associations such as WWF and Greenpeace, and social organizations such as Amnesty International and Oxfam). The first European network of critical shareholders, the European Responsible Investment Network (ERIN), was created in 2016 by 36 organizations from 12 different countries (Meggiolaro 2019).

In Italy, the first pioneering critical shareholding initiative was born in 1989 with the Legambiente group *Azionisti ecologisti*, which began to take part in the AGMs of listed companies to ask for their ecological conversion.

The initiative lasted until 2000: in 2003 the baton was picked up by *Banca Etica* and its newly created *Fondazione Finanza Etica* (FFE, which, unlike traditional banking establishments, is a cultural foundation), which would become the most active player in the following years, setting up a working group on shareholder engagement involving numerous representatives of civil society. In 2007, upon the proposal of some participants in the working group, for the first time FFE purchased a small – although not entirely symbolic – share quota in two companies: the energy company Enel and the oil and gas company Eni (respectively 250 shares, for a value of approximately 1,750 euros, and 80 shares, equal to approximately 2,000 euros), and began to participate in their AGMs, soliciting them particularly on environmental issues and their energy policies.

Recently, the number of companies subject to critical shareholding in Italy thanks to FFE has expanded. Since 2016, upon the proposal of Rete Italiana per il Disarmo (RID, Italian Network for Disarmament), FFE has participated in the AGMs of the defence and security company Leonardo (formerly Finmeccanica), thanks to the possession of 3 shares, for a value of approximately 30 euros. In 2017, together with Forum Italiano dei Movimenti per l'Acqua, it bought 5 shares in the multi-utility group Acea (an investment of approximately 50 euros) and, in the same year, it also made its debut abroad, participating together with RID in the AGM of the German weapons-manufacturing firm Rheinmetall. Rheinmetall, among other things, has production plants in Sardinia, from where the weapons are exported to Saudi Arabia to be used in the Yemen war. Since 2018, together with the organization Re:Common (RE), FFE has participated in the AGM of the insurance company Generali, thanks to 10 stock shares (around 150 euros), while in 2019 it was the turn of a new international initiative, with the participation in the AGM of the clothing

retail company H&M in Sweden, together with the Clean Clothes Campaign (Meggiolaro 2019). Thanks also to the partnerships created over time, social (e.g., violations of human rights) and governance issues (in particular remuneration policies) have been added to the initial activities which concentrated above all on environmental issues.

At the same time, critical shareholding initiatives in Italy are now no longer limited to those promoted by FFE. Some organizations that had started their shareholder engagement with FFE have become autonomous over time: they now participate in AGMs – both those where FFE is present, maintaining organizational coordination, and other new ones – as independent shareholders, intervening on their own behalf. Moreover, alongside these major initiatives, in the last decade several listed companies have also been subject to critical shareholding by individual activists or local groups, both independently and invited by the more organized subjects mentioned above. In one of AGMs I attended, for instance, a very young shareholder who was not part of any organization took the floor to raise the issue of carbon compensation.

Changing to make others change

As already mentioned, my hypothesis – consistent with the organizational analysis promoted by Sociological new institutionalism – is that the shareholder engagement implemented through AGMs does not only – or mainly – act on the target companies, but also requires a significant change in the activist groups. The coordinates of this change, deriving from the analysis of the empirical material I collected, are illustrated in this section, which focuses on the political practice of collective social actors, as suggested by the anthropological literature on social movements (Escobar 1992).⁷

We can identify three main types of changes that activist organizations make when critically confronting their target companies. First, a change can be observed in the slant of the interventions in the AGM compared to previous (or alternative) forms of pressure on the same companies. As noted in the previous section, critical organizations do not start attending AGMs out of the

7. The empirical material presented in this and the next section is primarily based on the interviews conducted with the three representatives of the critical organizations active in Italy (FFE, RID, RE), because these interlocutors, more than others, have focused on the concrete practices of critical shareholding and its effects. Nevertheless, some references are also made to the content of the other interviews; more generally, the interviews with non-activists, together with the fieldwork and the analysis of the AGMs official documentation, have been used to trace the analytical and interpretative framework adopted.

blue, but usually have intense experiences of campaigning on ESG issues behind them. These campaigns are oppositional and, since they are public, they also aim to reveal to consumers the contradictions between the value system professed by companies and their actual operation. Thus, the slant is often polemical, if not downright aggressive. This approach, however, has turned out to be inadequate during participation in AGMs, where one of the objectives is to initiate a dialogue with the management and with other investors:

If you only go there as the super-protester, who basically says 'you're all accomplices in the deaths and destruction in the world', it's unlikely that other people in there will be on your side.⁸

We started with critical shareholding in 2007 in a very aggressive way [...]. Now our approach has changed, we've understood that great results aren't obtained by attacking the company, the results are obtained while, yes, being very critical but with facts, numbers and alternative proposals.⁹

This last interview excerpt evokes a second change that critical organizations undergo by engaging in AGMs, closely connected to the first one. Just as the slant must change, so must the proposed contents, at least partially. In fact, the traditional campaigning activity refers to a moral dimension, regardless of economic considerations. In attempting to initiate a dialogue with the target companies, the critical organizations must, however, set aside exclusively ethical positions, and instead focus on tangible arguments to support their claims: "Ten years ago, we attended assemblies in a naïve way, asking questions as idealistic activists. Now we participate with questions prepared by financial analysts and lawyers".¹⁰ In other words, a shift in content is required from *what is right for society* to *what is useful for the company*, according to a logic of economic rationality. The meeting minutes of the Italian companies that, in the last five years, have been subject to critical shareholding testify this transformation, despite their concise form. To be effective, activists must somehow temporarily change their role. It is not simply a question of "pretending to be an investor for a day",¹¹ but of adopting a new perspective and logic of action in order to be credible interlocutors in the AGM:

It's not about saying 'stop making weapons', which is our idea, but 'what can you do to guarantee shareholders business sustainability for the future?'. If you do critical shareholding, you must take the view that you're no longer

8. Activist, int. RID2.

9. Activist, int. FFE1.

10. Activist, int. FFE1.

11. Activist, int. RE3.

just an activist, but a shareholder [...] You go there as a shareholder, so you have to put yourself in the shareholder's shoes.¹²

Finally, the third type of change concerns the redefinition of the objectives of critical action, which reflects the multiplication of interlocutors whom the activists have to address and, consequently, the greater complexity of their work and communication. In detail, it is possible to identify four main interconnected objectives that are pursued through participation in the AGM.

A first basic objective, usually the initial one when an organization debuts in an AGM, is to give visibility to ongoing campaigns. AGMs are therefore perceived in the first instance as a showcase for protest and awareness initiatives already underway. Hence, participation follows an activist more than a shareholder logic, by aiming to exploit the media coverage of AGMs to expand the number of people receiving the campaign communication as much as possible:

The critical shareholding activities we do have also had a good response from the media and this is important to us. [...] If we go there, we protest, we say things, this is news and the media is there covering the news. In this way, we're also able to relaunch related campaigns.¹³

Even at a later stage, when the objectives of participation in AGMs become differentiated, communication remains a cornerstone of the critical organizations' action. At this point, it can be more sophisticated, providing different channels for different audiences: the hope of media coverage for the general public – as occurred in two out of three AGMs that I attended, on the side-lines of which activists were interviewed by the media – is thus added to internally managed communication, which aims to reach those who are already supporters of the organization and those belonging to other activist groups sensitive to the cause, to inform and motivate them:

Over the past five or six years we've tried to make the AGMs a social event too, so, to go live on Twitter, with the hashtags, clearly for a small group of interested parties. [...] And then on Facebook: this year we also had a social media manager who attended all the AGMs with us and made videos for us and then posted them on Twitter, Instagram and Facebook.¹⁴

A second objective related to participation in AGMs concerns the acquisition of corporate information that is not publicly available. Campaigning organizations often have difficulty interacting with target companies and

12. Activist, int. RID2.

13. Activist, int. RID2.

14. Activist, int. FFE1.

accessing detailed information about their behaviour in sensitive areas. Becoming a shareholder expands these possibilities, since the management is obliged to be accountable towards the owners of the company, even those who own only an infinitesimal share of it:

We participated with (*name of an NGO*) in the AGM of (*name of a listed company*). They (*the NGO*) had been trying to ask specific questions about some aspects of management for years, and the company ignored them. But if you go there as a shareholder in the meeting, the company must answer you. The information aspect is very important because you, as a shareholder, acquire a right that you don't have as a campaigner.¹⁵

Therefore, participation in the AGM becomes not only a tool to give resonance to campaigns but also a way to strengthen them, allowing activists to acquire corporate information that is otherwise precluded:

Having first-hand, secure, accurate information from companies is a tool that is perhaps less visible, less shiny than the moment of protest, but it's fundamental for our campaigns.¹⁶

Legislation comes to the aid of critical organizations in the delicate balance between public communication and the possibility of acquiring information. Article no. 127 ter of the *Testo Unico dell'intermediazione finanziaria* (Consolidated Financial Intermediation Act), introduced by Legislative Decree no. 27/2010, sets out that shareholders can ask questions even before the AGM and that the company must give a written reply at the latest during the AGM itself. This opportunity has turned out to be a central tool in the hands of activists, precisely because it allows them to pursue multiple objectives at the same time:

This gives us a great advantage because very often our questions are very technical, boring even, they're of no interest to either the press or the public. So we select a couple of impactful questions for the AGM, to launch them to the press and the campaign supporters, and then all the technical questions, which, however, we need in order to understand how to continue the campaign, are sent before the meeting, as required by article no. 127 ter.¹⁷

The selection of questions is a crucial point underlined by all the activists. An examination of the AGM official documents shows the extreme precision of the questions submitted before the meeting by these activists, concerning for example the effective tax rates, the interest income, and the revenue of the

15. Activist, int. FFE1.

16. Activist, int. RID2.

17. Activist, int. RE3.

subsidiaries, with data break-down by country. Part of the critical shareholding process consists of learning how to operate effectively, on the one hand to obtain impactful communication and displace the target company by putting it in difficulty during the AGM, on the other hand to get valuable information that is usually hidden:

Also based on possible media coverage, the decision we make is above all the choice between ‘Do we send these questions before the meeting?’ and ‘Do we ask these questions orally during the AGM?’. Because if you send them before, you lose the ‘I raise my hand and ask’ impact, [...] but you have the advantage that you have written answers, so you can then use them.¹⁸

The third objective, which directly refers to the change of role from activist to shareholder mentioned above, consists of exerting influence and pressure on other shareholders. As we have seen in the previous sections, this objective is often difficult to pursue due to the lack of interlocutors in the AGM: since the large shareholders tend to desert it, the AGM can rarely become a place for discussion with them. In the three AGMs that I attended there were no large investors and the funds were represented by young practitioners from law firms who acted as proxy advisors. However, also thanks to the media coverage, it is always possible that the issues raised during the AGM will subsequently come to their attention:

When we participate in the AGM [...], we have to translate our themes, and say for example: ‘beware that pollution can cost you a lot in fines that can then decrease the profit of shareholders’ [...]. What we always try to do is ensure that a theme that arises within a campaign ends up becoming a relevant theme for other shareholders as well.¹⁹

The ultimate goal, in this case, is to build alliances with other relevant owners beyond the AGM, so that they develop attention to the issues raised by activists and, possibly, urge the company to change its behaviour. However, this is a difficult objective to pursue, which would require a type of action by large shareholders that at the moment is hardly observed in the Italian context:

If they were many more shareholders for profit saying: ‘This business direction [...] creates problems for us because it doesn’t create profit’, [...] this would be very important, it’d give us more strength. Because we’d act with more quantity, but also with a different quality.²⁰

18. Activist, int. RID2.

19. Activist, int. FFE1.

20. Activist, int. RE3.

The fourth and final objective concerns the actual impact on the target company's policies. This objective, which at first glance might seem to be the main reason why critical organizations participate in AGMs, in actual fact appears much more nuanced and often subject to redefinition compared to the initial plans. In trying to change corporate policies, activist groups need to put aside the radicalism that usually characterizes their actions and focus on gradual interventions. In other words, they must accept the inertia of large companies and proceed according to an incremental logic, and make do with affecting limited aspects with their solicitations:

On several occasions, they (*the target companies*) accepted our proposals and made them their own [...]. We're hardly talking about revolutions, however... often the critical shareholder is frustrated by the fact that yes, we have said this and that, they tell us yes and then do nothing. In reality, companies are very complex organisms, they need a lot of time to change, [...] we must always be there to tease and make proposals.²¹

This shift from a radical to an incremental logic of action introduces a significant change in the assessment of critical shareholders' success and, at the same time, can also make the concomitant pursuit of other objectives, in particular communication, more complex:

One of our successes was the modification of the remuneration policy regarding sustainability criteria: the company had included 15% ESG criteria among the long-term variable remuneration criteria. We said: we're happy that you've added ESG criteria, but they don't seem very objective criteria, and we explained why. We'd like you to change these criteria. They modified them and raised their weight from 15% to 25%. However, this is a success that is difficult to communicate to the general public, because we're not talking about moving mountains.²²

This example shows how critical shareholding profoundly affects the balance and objectives of both the activist organizations and the target companies. In the next section, I will go into this last aspect.

Target companies amidst resistance, pressure and openness

Faced with the action of critical organizations, the reaction of target companies can essentially be of two types: defensive or willing to dialogue and make changes. Obviously, this is an analytical distinction, which in reality is usually not so rigid: on the one hand, there are many intermediate positions that companies can take, also depending on the topic raised; on the other

21. Activist, int. FFE1.

22. Activist, int. FFE1.

hand, over time the orientation of a single company can shift towards an attitude of greater openness or closure to external solicitations.

In the defensive sphere, we can first of all identify some strategies concerning the management methods of the AGM. These are dynamics to neutralize the opposition, which aim to dampen their criticism in the eyes of both other shareholders and the media. A first banal technique concerns the time management during the AGM, which can limit the expression of dissent:

It also depends on the AGM, there is management and management, at the beginning the chairman can say: the interventions can be of a maximum of 10 minutes and a 5 minutes reply, or a maximum of 5 minutes and a 2 minutes reply. Once these rules did not exist and the troublemakers talked for an hour of interventions.²³

In the AGMs that I attended, a sound signal warned the speakers that their time was running out. In one of them, moreover, if the intervention lasted more than 30 seconds after the end signal, the microphone was deactivated. In another AGM, in giving the floor to some participants – evidently already known for the interventions made in the past years – the chairman was recommended to respect the 10 minutes assigned and not to digress, eliciting giggles from other attendees and, in at least two cases, a heated argument with the speakers.

The participation of compliant subjects in the AGM and the scheduling of a well-determined sequence of speeches are also part of the management methods:

(An NGO) brought some people from Africa or Latin America to criticize the company. (The company) has studied a counter-strategy by inviting people close to it to speak in the AGM [...], such as friendly NGOs, university professors with similar positions to theirs. [...] They organize the AGM, so they leave nothing to chance: our first speech is followed by a speech in support of the company, then there is me, then another speech in their favour, then there's our 'bad' Nigerian and then there's their 'good' Nigerian. It's like a big sandwich where there are layers that soften everything.²⁴

But the management of dissent does not only involve the actual moment of the AGM. Often companies try to start a dialogue with critical organizations outside the meeting. While in some cases, as we will see, this is aimed at introducing some real changes to their policies, in many other cases it is simply a way to try to keep the activists quiet:

23. Chairman, int. LC1.

24. Activist, int. FFE1.

Especially in the case of large companies that have invested a lot of money in the corporate social responsibility departments in recent years, they try to send us their CSR manager who comes to recite all the criteria they follow but doesn't answer our questions. [...] The company always tries to neutralize us with this CSR function, which in most cases is an offshoot of marketing.²⁵

An investor relations manager partially admitted this practice, stating that:

Except in rare cases, there is no one-to-one dialogue with small shareholders. The only exception is when there is an organized team that raises sensitive issues for the company, in this case targeted meetings can be organized.²⁶

Another outside-the-meeting strategy, compatible with this one, consists of trying to break any alliances that may be created – or which may exist from the outset – between different critical groups, according to the divide and rule policy:

What (*the company*) tries to do most of the time is to isolate the various groups. If they see four organizations participating in the AGM, they try to contact only one of them and say: please come (*to a private meeting*), but don't tell others anything.²⁷

In addition to defensive behaviour, there may be openness, which however in some cases is just a façade:

When I was in (*name of a listed company*) an environmental activist, a nice guy, took part in the AGM. Every year he made the same intervention but we always let him talk, it was important for the company, also to be sensitive on certain issues.²⁸

Sometimes real change happens due to a displacement effect: not all companies are used to being in the spotlight due to public criticism and, when this happens, the desire to protect their reputation can be the driving force behind seeking dialogue with activists and intervening on company policies:

(*This company*) is an exception, because its AGM is very crowded, there are small investors from the local area. The first year, people applauded at the end of our speeches. It was so unusual [...]. This forced the company to make some commitments immediately. The CEO and the chairman came to talk to us on the sidelines of the AGM... no one had ever campaigned against them, their brand is considered reassuring, so they recognized the huge risk to their reputation. Although in an awkward way, they immediately made commitments and within two to three years launched policies on coal. This

25. Activist, int. FFE1.

26. Investor relations manager, int. LC4.

27. Activist, int. FFE1.

28. Ceo, int. LC2.

AGM was very strategic for us, even more than we thought, because they felt a lot of pressure and acted accordingly.²⁹

Even when the change is not so sudden, the repeated confrontation with critical shareholders in the AGM – and the associated reputational risk – can produce a transformation over time. This transformation stems primarily from a change in the views towards the activists. In other words, they stop being seen exclusively as a problem and instead begin to be conceived of as subjects with knowledge and skills, from whose action the company can derive concrete benefits:

The company listens to us and recognizes that we're prepared interlocutors, and that it can also learn something from us. For free. A manager told us: 'basically, you've given us free advice on this issue'. [...] They've understood that it's worth listening to us, and not ignoring us.³⁰

This shift in perspective on critical shareholding can ultimately lead to real change, and cause the company to modify some aspects of its business:

In the 2017 AGM, we raised the issue of coal imports from Colombia associated with human rights violations, and the CEO made a commitment and said: 'I'm tired of this Colombian story that you're always bringing up, I promise I'll go there and check it out'. And the following year he broke the contracts with these suppliers... A decision that the company then also used to appear virtuous in the eyes of its stakeholders.³¹

Conclusions

The analysis of critical shareholding reveals some concrete dynamics related to the expansion of financial capital in corporations and its consequences on the rest of society. Far from being a homogeneous and homogenizing field, in which a single type of value, supported by quantitative metrics, it is stated, finance instead shows multiple facets, as do the actors who populate it and are engaged in a continuous redefinition of the meaning of their economic actions (Zelizer 1994). In this concluding section I focus on these aspects, highlighting how they contribute to advancing our knowledge on movements and countermovements of finance and their mutual relationship.

The empirical material allowed close observation of the shareholder value approach – which drives the expansion of finance in the non-financial sector – revealing its complex nature. If, in general terms, the shareholder value

29. Activist, int. RE3.

30. Activist, int. RID2.

31. Activist, int. RE3.

approach indicates that the main objective of companies is to promote the interests of shareholders, here the attention is on the plurality of these interests, which can partially go beyond economic rationality. In fact, shareholders are not all the same and, consequently, the way they conceive of the meaning of *value* is not the same either.

Alongside actors oriented towards immediate enrichment – making up the great majority – there are some critical shareholders, who, as we have seen, exploit the opportunities provided by financialization to promote ESG causes; but there are also, for example, institutional shareholders aiming for long-term sustainable investments that may eventually take a stand in favour of some changes and thus promote the activists' work (Goranova, Ryan 2014). So, even in a context in which the maximization of financial value largely prevails, shareholders remain heterogeneous and their actions can introduce fractures within the seemingly monolithic movement of finance. These fractures can then be amplified by actors external to the corporations, such as the media and individual citizens, that work as a sounding board for particularly sensitive issues and can foster unprecedented alliances. A recent example of a stance taken by an institutional investor concerns BlackRock, the largest investment fund in the world, which – under the pressure of public opinion – sent a letter to the companies in which it has invested announcing possible dissenting votes in the AGMs in the absence of a concrete commitment to fight climate change.³²

The study of critical shareholding therefore reveals the dialectical nature of the processes that take place in and around the AGM, showing its potential but also its limits, due, for example, to the scarcity of real interlocutors – such as large shareholders – who take part in it. The ethnographic approach is particularly suitable for this analysis, since it can highlight the relevance (or irrelevance) of the AGM as a physical place of confrontation between shareholders. Observing the functioning of a place formally appointed to make official corporate decisions reveals, among other things, the existence of further informal meetings – hidden and inaccessible to most – where the salient issues are actually discussed and deliberated.

The emergence of a dialectical relationship between actors, played out both inside and outside the AGM, also invites proper consideration of the dimension of time. In detail, analysing the long-term relationships between critical

32. www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/larry-fink-ceo-letter (accessed on 3/02/2022).

shareholders and target companies, rather than focusing on individual episodes of confrontation, shows the incremental nature of change and its two directions, thereby confirming my initial hypothesis. A diachronic perspective allows to understand, on the one hand, that the absence of radical changes in corporate behaviour does not usually mean that everything remains invariable, but that small progressive changes occur whose extent can only be appreciated in the long term. On the other hand, we can thus see that the transformations concern all the actors involved, not just the target companies, and that indeed part of the change derives precisely from the mutual orientation of those exercising and those subject to the pressure.

This brings me to the last point that I would like to emphasize, concerning the dynamics of mutual legitimation that arise when a target company accepts critical solicitations and introduces a real change in its policies. If it is true that this constitutes the greatest desirable success for activists, who see their efforts valued and can report it to their supporters, it is also true that this implies an attribution of recognition to the target company, which in turn can exploit this external acknowledgement to promote itself with its stakeholders and consumers.

This process recalls Boltanski and Chiapello's analysis of the spirit of capitalism, according to which criticism catalyses change and neutralising adaptation, reinforcing capitalism instead of undermining it (1999). As pointed out by the authors, "capitalism needs its enemies, people who have a strong dislike for it and who want to wage war against it. These are the people who provide it with the moral foundations that it lacks, and who enable it to incorporate justice-enhancing mechanisms whose relevancy it would not otherwise have to acknowledge" (Boltanski, Chiapello 2005: 163). The anthropological studies on CSR highlight this "chameleon-like capacity" of corporations to absorb oppositional ideas and mainstream them, turning them into business opportunities (Dolan, Rajak 2016: 5). Thus, the results pursued by activists immediately become subjects of corporate capture and, with their implementation, help redefine the target company "as an ethical actor, claiming to elide the frictions between principles and profit" (*ivi*). If it is true that critical shareholding gives rise to a push-pull dialectic between companies and activists, it is even more true that the strong imbalance of power of the parties involved emphasizes the risk of exploitation or manipulation of the requests carried out by activists. Through shareholding, therefore, critical organizations become protagonists of the inherent contradictions of corporate capitalism,

actively participating – at their own risk – in specific financial movements and countermovements.

From a relational point of view, a delicate dynamic arises between corporations and activists, which must be managed by both parties in a balanced way, in order to reap the maximum benefit from their actions without however putting themselves in a disadvantageous position for subsequent exchanges. This fine balance is not achieved once and for all, but is subject to continuous redefinitions by critical groups and target companies that are both parts of the same changing organizational field.

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Bringing dissent to shareholders' meetings.

An investigation into critical shareholding.

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State action and the expansion of finance during the Spanish housing crisis

Alleviating or amplifying the social impacts of financialization?

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ABSTRACT: This paper addresses the entanglements, complicities and collisions between financialization processes and state action during the current housing crisis in Spain, with a focus on Catalonia and the Barcelona area in the last decade. Departing from the assumption that housing financialization has been a major driver of the crisis, state interventions, including housing policies and legal regulations imposed on financial and real estate markets and on landlord-tenant relations, will be interpreted as modulators that may either alleviate or amplify the impacts of financial dynamics on people's access to adequate housing. Drawing on the cases of several legal reforms, we will illustrate variegated attitudes towards financial extraction adopted by different state agencies. It will be thus shown how, in the rare cases where the state has tried to alleviate the social harms derived from financial extraction, reforms have been superficial, have arrived late, and have failed to reverse the structural drivers of the crisis. We will thus try to shed some light into the nature of state action in the face of housing financialization, contending that states should not be understood as outsiders with respect to finance, as, to the contrary, they are part of finance's very conditions of possibility.

KEYWORDS: FINANCIALIZATION; STATE; HOUSING CRISIS; HOUSING POLICY; FINANCIAL REGULATION; SPAIN



This article will address the entanglements, complicities, and collisions between housing financialization processes and different instances of state action. How has the Spanish state – comprising different functions and agencies – interacted with the advances and withdrawals of finance during the last decade and a half, in the context of a housing crisis? More specifically, has the state contributed to alleviate the social impacts of financialization as regards the right to housing, or, to the contrary, has it amplified them?

Our inquiry in this particular arena should contribute to answer more abstract questions that are being currently discussed in the literature on the role of the state as regards financialization: Should states be understood as outsiders with respect to finance, or, to the contrary, are they part of finance’s very conditions of possibility, as several authors (Lapavitsas 2014; Aalbers 2019) have argued? Can we speak about a “financialization of public policy”, understood as the privileging of the financial industry’s interests in the policy domain (Aalbers 2017: 3), as a factor of the housing crisis occurred in our area of study? How has the housing crisis been addressed through lawmaking and regulation, understood as a “core state function” (Mikus 2019: 13), and to what extent has the financialization of housing been promoted or limited along this process? Does the regulatory failure (Kalaitzake 2015) after the financial crash evince the political protection of the financial industry? In answering these questions, we will be inspired by Lagna’s suggestion to “abandon the sterile state-market dichotomy to focus on the social relations constructing state and market institutions as part and parcel of a comprehensive whole that is human reality” (2016:10). We will thus avoid dichotomous accounts and depart from the stance that a state-finance nexus exists, where the state acts both as a subject and an object of financialization (Mikus 2019).

The complex interactions between the workings of the financial industry, different instances of state action, and the resistances and coping strategies of the citizenry, sometimes giving way to collective action and politization, will be explored under this light. Evidence from the experiences of the Spanish and Catalan housing crisis in the last decade and a half will be provided to illustrate three different kinds of entanglements of financial operations and state action: a) *laissez-faire* and state intervention arriving late to mitigate the effects of the crisis; b) the blatant promotion of the financial industry’s interests in the rental market by the state; and c) ineffective enforcement of rights-based legislation promoted through popular legislative initiatives; plus judiciary counter-reforms aimed at deactivating such legislation. But, before

that, a brief account of how the Spanish housing crisis is rooted in financial processes will be provided in the next section.

The Spanish housing crisis and its financial roots

The housing crisis experienced in Spain in the last decade has consisted of several overlapping waves. First, a spate of repossessions affected many mortgagors following the 2007 crash¹, forcing them out of their homes and leaving them liable for the outstanding debt after the foreclosure (Colau, Alemany 2012). Then, from 2014 on, a rent bubble led to a predominance of rental evictions over those caused by repossessions. Although the official figures of rental evictions only include judiciary ones, due to rent non-payment, the total amount of displaced tenants would be much increased if also so-called invisible evictions², those due to the sudden increase of rents or to landlords' refusal to renew leases, were added (Anzano 2018).

Besides all this, since March 2020, because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic crisis that it entailed, many dwellers found themselves under the threat of eviction (Ill-Raga, González, Sabaté 2020). This was so despite the moratorium enacted by the Spanish government for both mortgagors and tenants in hardship, with

very restrictive eligibility criteria. For example, applicants needed to prove that their situation was a result of the pandemic. People with long trajectories of housing dispossession and residential exclusion, such as those forced to squat or to sub-rent a room in a shared flat, rarely found relief under those extraordinary measures, as it could be observed in Barcelona in September 2020, when courts re-opened after the lockdown and evictions multiplied despite the alleged moratorium. In this way, a pre-existing, unsolved housing crisis was chronified and aggravated for many, and became a structural condition entailing a systematic transgression of the right to proper housing (Observatori DESC 2020).

In this article, we will depart from the premise that there is an intimate relation between the housing crisis we have just described, and an underlying process of housing financialization. Several elements point at this relationship, that can be summarised as follows. First, the transformation of Spanish cities in the last decades has been guided by neoliberal policies fostering an in-

1. More than 800,000 home repossessions were initiated between 2007 and the first quarter of 2020 (Source: *Consejo General del Poder Judicial* 2020).
2. Known as “no-fault” or “no-cause evictions” in Anglo-Saxon contexts.

creasing penetration of financial logics in the arenas of urban planning (Vives, Rullán 2014; Coq-Huelva 2013) and housing provision (Palomera 2014). In the latter sense, housing has been treated as a financial asset and as a store of value (Aalbers 2008). This was so, first, through mortgage lending linked to securitization, and through the repossession of housing units that acted as collateral in such loans. Then, institutional investments in rental housing, often packed in big stocks and coming from the previous wave of repossessions (Janoschka *et al.* 2019; García Lamarca 2020) became the predominant financial strategy thanks to a state-led “policy package” (Gil, Martínez 2022). In all these processes, financial actors played a central role, be them banks, whose thriving mortgage business supported both construction activity and housing purchases during the housing bubble (1997-2007) and then benefited from bailouts and public subsidies (Gabarre 2019); be them private equity and venture capital funds, whose irruption in the Spanish rental market, often with speculative strategies, went hand in hand with a growing concentration of housing stocks in the hands of big corporate landlords (Janoschka *et al.* 2019; García Lamarca 2020; Méndez 2021).

Having established this correlation between housing financialization and the housing crisis, and in order to examine the role of the state in enabling, shaping or holding back financial fluxes, we will draw on several kinds of empirical material: qualitative data collected during ethnographic fieldwork on the repossessions crisis between 2012 and 2015, observations made during the author’s participation as an activist in the creation of the Catalan tenants union *Sindicat de Llogateres* (2017-18), and a retrospective analysis of secondary sources on the selected case studies (including legislation, press articles, and social movements materials). The evidence provided will contribute to go beyond the particularity of our case study, and to advance towards more far-reaching accounts of the entanglements of financial dynamics and state action³, taking into account the factors and practices that have enabled the pervasive financialization of housing in European peripheries (Tulumello, Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou 2021). While the financial roots of the housing crisis

3. Our efforts here will not exhaust the possibilities of a qualitative exploration of state action. Notably, more accurate knowledge is needed about the particular mechanisms that lead to the promulgation of laws and policies, what Mikus (2019: 25) has called the “backstage processes of their making”, including *consultations* and *negotiations* among different actors who are influential on this arena. What we offer here is rather an analysis of the visible outcomes of regulation and policy making, their impacts on people’s living conditions, and the claims and alternative proposals that have emerged from an organised citizenry.

have had global impacts and ramifications, it has found a particularly acute expression in certain countries, and Spain can be considered among them due to a panoply of circumstances including its dependent position vis à vis international capital flows and financial regulations due to its semi-peripheral location (Sabaté 2021), its familist welfare regime intertwined with a housing system that privileges owner occupation and commodified housing (Allen *et al.* 2024), and the robust historical and ideological foundations of its “society of homeowners” (López, Rodríguez 2010).

Although the geographical framework of several instances of state action remains nation-wide, a particular focus will be put on Catalonia and, more particularly, on the metropolitan area of Barcelona, where the housing crisis has hit hard, and where the social mobilisations against it have been particularly prominent. Our account will include several legislative campaigns of housing rights movements – particularly of the anti-repossessions platform *PAH* (Colau, Alemany 2012; Mir *et al.* 2013; França 2017) and the tenants union *Sindicat de Llogateres* (Anzano 2018; Palomera 2018) –, who have claimed for, suggested, and in some cases forced state intervention, often with limited effects, but in a very significant manner for our purpose in this article: shedding light into the articulation between financialization and state action. What follows is therefore a sample of instances of state interventions – or the lack thereof – intended to illustrate our argument.

Instances of state action in the field of housing

State actions and interventions in the field of housing may modulate – either alleviate or amplify – the impacts of financial dynamics on the access to adequate housing by the population, thus aggravating or mitigating the housing crisis. Such interventions may consist of legal regulations imposed on financial and real estate markets and on landlord-tenant relations, as well as on housing policies implemented in both public and private sectors. But, as it will be shown, they may also take the form of inaction, or of partial, ineffective, or even counterproductive action in some cases.

This section will focus on several legislative and regulatory changes occurred in Spain in the last decade. Unpacking the different layers and institutions of the state involved in each case, such changes will be classified in three categories that roughly follow a chronological sequence: from the insufficient post-2008 responses to the mortgage crisis, to deregulation that enabled a transfer of financial extraction to the rental market, to the obstruction of the

enforcement of rights-based legislation fiercely fought for by housing justice movements. At each stage, we will provide empirical evidence on the interplay between legislative and regulatory changes affecting financial activities, and the grassroots experiences and strategies of inhabitants dealing with the housing crisis, sometimes resulting in collective and political claims, before turning back to our theoretical concern in the conclusion.

The aftermath of the GFC: from *laissez-faire* to late state intervention

It can be the case that, at certain moments of macroeconomic cycles where financial accumulation is having a distinct impact on the living conditions of the population, as it happened during the Spanish housing bubble and following the economic crash of 2008, political authorities adopt a *laissez-faire* approach, both because of the previous implementation of neoliberal reforms, and of the lack of incentives or pressures to intervene in the economy. We can interpret in this way the several years it took the Spanish government to react in front of, first, predatory lending in the years of apparent prosperity prior to 2008 (Nasarre 2011; Zunzunegui 2013; Sabaté 2020), and second, of the increase of mortgage default rates and the repossessions crisis that started to show serious signs already in 2008⁴. The first, very timid attempts to intervene arrived as late as in 2012 (Di Felicianantonio, Aalbers 2017), when already more than 320,000 households had lost their homes to banks⁵, and many of them remained indebted afterwards. The housing crisis had already attained a very acute moment and was affecting the most precarious sectors of the population, importantly migrants from the global South, who found themselves in a legal void where only the creditors' claims were acknowledged. Many of them joined the emergent housing rights movements (Gutiérrez-Garza 2020; Suárez 2017), but the immense effort they invested in their struggle would not always be fruitful.

We met Máximo, a migrant from Ecuador, and his wife in the spring of 2012 at a local *PAH* assembly. They had obtained their mortgage in the early 2000s from a well-known Catalan savings bank, through the mediation of a mortgage broker who focused in not-so-solvent customers. As it was recurrent those days among migrants, they had been granted the loan based on so-called cross guarantees with an acquaintance, someone they had met in

4. The repossessions figure had more than doubled in one year, from 25,943 in 2007 to 58,686 in 2008 [Source: *Consejo General del Poder Judicial*].

5. Source: *Consejo General del Poder Judicial*.

the hospital where their eldest son was born, and with whom they would lose contact afterwards. Then, with the advent of the crisis, Máximo and his wife lost their jobs, except for some informal domestic part-time work that she continued to do. They could not to face their mortgage repayments, and, once in default, found themselves unable to force a negotiation with their creditor. In the absence of any protective legislation, their lack of bargaining power left them at the mercy of the bank's abuse of discretion. At first sight, not much could be done, except, thanks to their condition as migrants, going back to their country of origin in an attempt at fleeing their debt. Despite that, for some months Máximo fiercely fought within the *PAH* assembly and pioneered the extension of the movement from Barcelona to his city, located also within Barcelona's metropolitan area. After camping in front of the bank branch for several days and appearing in the local press, he attained some of his goals, such as the suppression of the guarantor's liability and the assignment in payment, that is to say, the cancellation of the whole debt after handing back the apartment's keys to the creditor. But he remained homeless, indebted for other consumption loans and unemployed, with no prospects of recovery from a long-standing period of hardship. He continued to claim for an alternative shelter for some months, while he kept organising and giving advice to other mortgagors at risk of default. But eventually, in the summer of 2012 and about to have a third child, the family decided to go back to Ecuador, where one of Máximo's siblings could offer him a job.

The legal reforms that arrived that same year were too late to provide a solution for this Ecuadorian his family. In March and November 2012, two decrees were passed⁶. The first one contained a "good practice protocol" for banks, recommending them to provide debt relief for debtors who found themselves *under the exclusion threshold*, and the second established a moratorium of evictions for the same profile of customers. To be eligible, they had to match very narrow criteria, such as adopting a "good faith debtors" attitude, proving that they were in "real need" (Sabaté 2022), and having tried to obtain a debt restructuration before applying for debt relief. As a result, as we could observe time after time at *PAH* assemblies that year, almost no one could benefit from those measures. In addition, as the recommendations were not binding, their implementation entirely depended on the bank's will, always on an individual basis, and, even when the bank would open that door, the bureaucratic labyrinth that awaited debtors (Aziz 2016) was far from easy to cross. The

6. *Real Decreto-ley 6/2012, de 9 de marzo*, and *Real Decreto-ley 27/2012, de 15 de noviembre*.

conservative government had succeeded in intervening late enough, and in a sufficiently innocuous manner, in order not to harm the interests of the banking industry, who was in turn provided with a procedure to wipe off defaulted loans and toxic assets from their balances. It would not be until much later, in early 2015, that the first personal bankruptcy law (the Second Opportunity or Over-Indebtedness Act⁷) was passed in the Spanish Parliament, filling what had been a legislative gap that, during the worst years of the mortgage crisis, had left debtors to the mercy of a Mortgage Act that went back to 1946.

Forging a rent bubble: the promotion of financial interests in the rental market by the state

In some cases, the extent to which lobbies and economic interests may directly motivate legislation to ease or even promote financialization processes becomes blatant. Perhaps the most conspicuous example of this in relation to the Spanish housing crisis is the legislation passed in the 2012-13 period, which secured the transition to a new financialization cycle in the face of the burst of the housing and mortgage bubbles, and the resulting decline of mortgage securitization (García Lamarca 2020; Gil, Martínez 2022). With the reform of the regulation of the rental market in 2013⁸, the duration of leases was shortened from 5 to 3 years, and the yearly rent increases needed no longer to be limited to any public indexes, among other measures. These novelties dramatically fragilized the security of tenancy (Módenes 2019) and fostered rent price increases irrespective of people's income and purchase power. But its effects are better to be understood in combination with other pieces of legislation that had been passed in previous years, that allowed the creation of REITs in 2009⁹, and then granted them unprecedented tax exemptions in 2012. This combination provided a most lucrative channel for speculative investments in the rental housing market (González Guzmán 2018; Janoschka *et al.* 2019; García Lamarca 2020). To complete what some critics and activists have dubbed “a perfect storm”, the potential obstacles to landlords' profit extraction entailed by tenants' inability to pay rent were also foreseen and addressed with another legal reform, that of the Criminal Prosecution Act, that speeded up judiciary processes and allowed judges to serve “open date” eviction notices, with no

7. *Real Decreto-ley 1/2015, de 27 de febrero.*

8. *Ley 29/1994, de 24 de noviembre, de Arrendamientos Urbanos, modified on 5/6/2013.*

9. Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) are vehicles for investment in real estate markets. They are called SOCIMIs in Spain (González Guzmán 2018; García Lamarca 2020).

specification of the date, to prevent the eviction blockades that often delayed the process.

In all, this mutation of housing financialization was not unique to the Spanish context, but it also happened in other countries such as the UK, the US or Germany (Fields, Uffer 2016). But, in Spain, international investors enjoyed the considerable advantages entailed by the peripheral position of the Spanish economy within the EU – closely related to the weak regulations in place, as well as the already mentioned tax exemptions –, alongside the availability of large stocks of repossessed housing that were in banks' hands and were considered as toxic assets at that time¹⁰. As a result, international funds rapidly appeared and purchased big amounts of housing units at bargain prices, thus contributing to a process of extroverted financialization. This trend has been reinforced by the sale of large public housing stocks to foreign capital, as it happened in 2013 with the privatisation of Madrid's public housing company in favour of Blackstone (Janoschka *et al.* 2019) and, more recently, with the handover of large housing stocks that were in the hands of the SAREB¹¹ to real estate management firms controlled by international investment funds.

The impacts of the strategies for financial extraction entailed by the irruption of these international funds and institutional investors in the Spanish rental housing market was unveiled to the public some years later, as rent prices rose¹² and there started to be some public debate on the so-called invisible evictions provoked by rent increases that de facto expelled tenants who had duly paid their rent up to then, but who could not afford the new price imposed by their landlord, either within a same lease period, or between two leases. That was the predominant problem observed at the first open assemblies organised by the *Sindicat de Llogateres*, the tenants union that was created in Barcelona in 2017, rapidly attracting the attention of the media and the public. At that time, people who approached the union were mainly urban dwellers belonging to the working and middle classes that were suffering a

10. Some of them had already been transferred to the state-created asset management company SAREB, who would later engage in privatizations (Gabarre 2019) rather than seizing the opportunity to increase the meagre public housing stock.

11. The so-called “bad bank” that had absorbed the toxic assets of Spanish banks as part of a governmental, EU-promoted recapitalisation plan (see Gabarre 2019 for further details).

12. The average rent in Catalonia increased from € 539,00 in 2014 to € 735,00 in 2019, while in the city of Barcelona it went from € 688,00 to € 978,00 in the same period. Despite the pandemic in 2020, rent prices have not decreased, with an average of € 745,00 in Catalonia and 979€ in Barcelona during the third trimester of the year (most recent data available) [Source: Catalan Government, *Secretaria d'Hàbitat Urbà i Territori*].

considerable precarisation, to a great extent due to the disproportion between their income and their living expenses, among which rent stood out¹³. A pioneer example of this novel phenomenon, and of the resistances that could be deployed by tenants in front of it, was the case of a building located in Sant Joan Despí, a town in Barcelona's metropolitan area¹⁴. Some of the 150 tenant households living there started to receive notice of rent increases as their 3-year leases came to an end in 2018. The building had been sold by its bankrupt developer to a newly created company, that was in turn bought by a British subsidiary of investment bank Goldman Sachs¹⁵. The landlord's interests were represented by a property administrator based in Barcelona. The tenants were mostly working-class young couples with little children, families that had been formed when the access to homeownership was barred for them, and therefore had decided to rent and take root in the neighbourhood. Some of the increases imposed as a condition to renew leases entailed 100% of the current rent prices. Tenants seemed to have no other option than accepting the landlord's demands or leaving their homes. However, given the generalised rent bubble situation and the lack of rental housing in the area to relocate 150 households, they rather decided, in an unprecedented move, to organise themselves. To do so, they resorted to the new-born tenants union, and sought and obtained support from a long-established local neighbourhood association and from all political parties at the city council. They organised assemblies, hang banners from their windows and started to pressure the landlord's representative to force the opening of negotiations. Only with a few exceptions, those with finishing leases stayed in their homes and resisted for three months, while rejecting the new conditions until an acceptable result was obtained from negotiations on a collective basis. This result consisted in 20% increases for all, to be applied in a staggered manner. For leases finishing in 2019 and 2020 the battle remained open, but the accomplishment in the face of a transnational-scale landlord for the 94 most urgent cases, who could now afford to stay in their homes, was unprecedented at that time. Collective bargaining, and even the refiguration of a rent strike as some tenants with finished leases re-

13. This is particularly so for low-income tenants, as 46% of them devoted more than 40% of their income to housing expenses in 2019 according to OECD data for Spain. It was also a main concern for young people, as 23% of this population in the city of Barcelona was overburdened by housing expenses in 2018-19 [Source: IERMB and Idescat, *Estadístiques metropolitanas sobre condicions de vida* 2018-2019].

14. More details about this case at <https://sindicatdellogateres.org/victoria-a-sant-joan-despi/>

15. By the time of the conflict, the president of that new company was the CEO of Goldman Sachs in Spain.

mained in their flats during the negotiation period, were important landmarks of this struggle against the mechanisms of financial extraction.

Parallel to these no-fault evictions derived from the deregulation of rent increases and the resulting rent price bubble, evictions due to rent non-payment were also on the rise. In the *PAH* assemblies, such cases were replacing those derived from mortgage default and repossessions. In all, it became evident that, as the spate of mortgage default and home repossessions started to fade out slowly, after forcing hundreds of thousands of families out of homeownership and often leaving them with an outstanding debt, tenants, be them previously repossessed homeowners or not, were becoming the new victims of housing financialization, and this was happening with the complicity of public authorities and legislators who had devised a strategy to bail out the banking sector and to reshuffle the real estate business, to a great extent by attracting foreign investments coming from the global financial industry, thanks to a legal framework that was tailor-made for that kind of actors.

Obstructing rights-based legislation: ineffective law enforcement and judiciary counter-reforms

To obtain a complete description of the state's role in the Spanish housing crisis and in the face of the interests of housing finance, it should be acknowledged that some legislation has been passed in recent years to alleviate the social suffering entailed by that crisis. This new legislation, however, has been rarely the outcome of institutional initiatives and arrangements. To the contrary, it has taken hold thanks to popular pressure, either as a result of "popular legislative initiatives" (ILPs) led by social movements, or of activists' lobbying strategies addressed at legislators and public institutions, coupled with communication campaigns aimed at attracting public awareness and support. Two conspicuous examples of such processes taking place in Catalonia will be briefly described here.

Our first case study goes back to July 2015, when, after seven years of crisis that had struck many households in the form of mortgage default and repossessions among other circumstances, a coalition of social movements, with the *PAH* among them¹⁶, managed to collect more than 140,000 signatures that allowed them to submit a legislative text to the Catalan Parliament¹⁷. That

16. Together with the *Observatori dels Drets Econòmics, Socials i Culturals* and the *Aliança contra la Pobresa Energètica*.

17. The whole process is described at the initiative's website: <https://ilphabitatge.cat/es/>

text intended to cancel mortgage debts for households in hardship, ban evictions of defaulting mortgagors and of tenants in arrears with no alternative housing, make financial institutions and big landlords responsible for the provision of affordable rents, temporarily convert vacant housing stocks owned by funds and banks into public housing, and guarantee the supply of electricity, water and gas for households unable to pay their bills. In all, the law project was aimed at forcing powerful economic actors -such as banks, funds, big landlords and energy companies- to take responsibility for the harms that the housing and economic crisis was causing to the Catalan population. The 24/2015 Act was passed with the support of most parliamentary groups, except for the right-wing Popular Party (PP), who would devise a judiciary strategy to reverse the changes introduced. In 2019, a new Decree (17/2019) was passed by the Catalan Government to extend the social protections against the housing crisis already included in the 24/2015 text.

Let us now turn to our second example of legislative change: in September 2020, the Catalan tenants union *Sindicat de Llogateres*, with the support of more than 4,000 civil society organisations and after much discursive effort to counteract the hegemony of neoliberal dogmas about market self-regulation, succeeded in having four Catalan parliamentary parties – a majority within the house – vote for a rent control law. The 11/2020 Act constituted an unprecedented measure aimed at alleviating the unaffordability of rents amid a rent bubble and the economic hardship brought about by the Covid-19 health crisis. Again, this first rent control legislation endangered landlords' aspiration at unlimited rent extraction and constituted an unprecedented attack at the strong economic interests at play on the rental market. As in the previous case, already at the end of the parliamentary voting, the Popular Party announced that they would appeal to the Constitutional Court against what they considered as a threat to private property.

As it can be noted in these two examples, some recent legislation has considerable potential in guaranteeing the right to proper housing, something that happens invariably at the expense of financial profit. However, in both cases, governments and authorities (at several administrative levels) have shown a lack of determination to effectively enforce the law, to punish those responsible of breaching it, or to provide the budget needed for its implementation. Besides, as a result of disputes among territories, often involving electioneering strategies put in place by political parties, such laws have often been questioned by representatives of the real estate business, both in

the arena of public debates, and in the grassroots practices of those who represent their interests. Misleading information about the law's validity and entailings is disseminated through a variety of mechanisms, the social media and the mainstream press among them. We could observe the effects of that misinformation and defamation strategies, for instance, as Daniel and Inés, a tenant couple who had lived in their rented dwelling for the last eight years and who now wished to stay put, were negotiating a new lease with the real estate agent who represented their landlord. According to the new rent control measures, they were entitled to have their rent frozen. In the conversations entertained around that event, the agent conceded that, but expressed her view that the rent freeze they were benefiting from would not last very long, as "there were serious doubts about its constitutionality". Also, the lack of supervision and control by public authorities, and therefore the impunity of landlords despite the sanctions provided by the law for those breaching it, can be illustrated by the case of Ariadna and Federico, another tenant household. During the negotiation of the rent for their new apartment, they had to bear the hostility of an agent who became infuriated as the tenants-to-be invoked the law. Then she called them back to announce in a condescending way that the landlady had agreed to their proposal, despite they had "played with fire", implying that, as a result of them mentioning their legal rights, they had been about to be discarded and replaced by other candidates who would be more prone to accept illegal lease conditions. These examples reflect no doubt the pronounced asymmetry between the two parts in a lease agreement, as well as the reduced reach of rights-based regulations on that kind of contractual relationship, in the framework of a strong dominance of financial and real estate powers that is not only reflected in hegemonic discourses, but also shapes the grassroots practices of people acting simultaneously as gatekeepers of the access to housing, and as guardians of elite's financial interests.

But, beyond these micro practices on the rental market, as it has already been mentioned, the most effective way to block from the root legislative changes have been the systematic appeals made to the Constitutional Court to have such laws suspended, either partially or wholly, with several arguments at hand. That is what happened to the 24/2015 Act, that could not be enforced for almost three years (2016-2019) due to an appeal made by the Spanish government in Madrid (the PP being in power at that time), while a sentence was awaited. The suspension would cease in 2019 after the socio-democrat party PSOE forced a government change. Afterwards, the 17/2019 Decree that had

extended the law was suspended with a formal argument¹⁸. In turn, an appeal against the Catalan rent control legislation resulted in a Constitutional Court sentence invalidating the law in March 2022, after being in force for 18 months. All these events have been triggered by the conservative political party (PP) that is part of the opposition in Catalonia, and who typically advocates for free market mechanisms on the financial and real estate arenas. For them, state action should be reduced to the provision of social housing (without relaxing budgetary austerity), while safeguarding private property and freedom of enterprise as absolute priorities. Their discourse takes advantage of the high rates of homeownership in Spain, a predominance that guarantees considerable social support to the prioritization of private property rights in the Spanish “homeowners society” (López, Rodríguez 2010). A discourse, however, that conceals the fact that the derogation of housing rights legislation benefits in the first place financial and corporate actors, and not so much the small landlords and owner-occupiers from whom such political moves obtain political legitimacy (Cardona 2022).

Conclusion

One of the ways in which financialization has been conceptualised (Van der Zwan 2014) is as the penetration of financial logics in social and everyday life (Martin 2002; Langley 2008), directly affecting the arena of consumption and the exercise of rights (Gago, Mezzadra 2015) as well as social reproduction (Santos *et al.* 2018). The case of the financialization of housing in Spain is particularly telling in this sense, as it goes hand in hand with a sustained housing crisis that has been affecting and disrupting all these aspects for more than a decade. Despite these experiences have not been exclusive to that country, the Spanish housing crisis displays certain specificities derived from its semi-peripherality, the advanced state of housing commodification combined with a familist housing regime (Alle *et al.* 2024), the deliberate policies that have contributed to the ideological and historical construction of the preference for home ownership (López, Rodríguez 2010), and, as we have shown in this article, the direct involvement of different state agencies in the promotion of financial interests and operations, which has encountered vigorous resistances and counter-initiatives on the part of left-wing housing rights movements, only partially paralleled by anti-financialization struggles in neighbour coun-

18. According to the Court, the text should have taken the form of a law rather than a decree passed by the Catalan government.

tries (Saaristo, Silva 2023). Unlike other contexts where the state itself has countered financialization trends (Shen *et al.* 2023), in the Spanish case this has seldom happened in the absence of social movements' initiatives and street-level pressures.

An understanding of financialization as financial value extraction – as opposed to the extraction of natural resources, energy, knowledge or human labour – and therefore as a particular manifestation of extractive operations (Mezzadra, Neilson 2017) highlights the incorporation to financial dynamics of previously non-financialized economies, such as the domestic economies of homeowners that borrowed subprime mortgages, or those of tenants who witnessed the irruption of an investment fund as their new landlord. This confirms what Gago and Mezzadra have described as the “continuous expansion of the financial valorisation frontier through the ‘colonisation’ of social territories alien to their command” (2015: 45), furthering forms of dispossession and exploitation “that directly target social cooperation and force subjects to confront the risks and uncertainty of economic volatility” (Mezzadra, Neilson 2017: 13). Housing, household economies and certain layers of the state that are usually thought of as independent from profit motives (such as those in charge of welfare provision or social protection) can be seen as the outsides that are being incorporated to financial dynamics, although in some cases this does not happen without resistance (Mikus 2019). But these advances of finance, and the occasional setbacks it encounters, should not be attributed solely to impersonal market mechanisms. Rather, the agencies behind them should be further investigated, and this article has tried to make a contribution in this sense by exploring the role of the state in this regard.

Even if hegemonic neoliberal discourses publicly condemn state intervention in the economy, and advocate for deregulation, privatisation and liberalisation, financialization goes hand in hand with neoliberalization. As Aalbers (2019) has pointed out, state action is a precondition for housing financialization, as the state “is no bystander in the financialization of the economy, firms, households, and of the state itself”, but it “has actively promoted financialization” (2019: 11). In a previous text, Aalbers (2017: 8-9) noted that new kinds of financial markets have been created and promoted by governments under the influence of the financial capital lobby. The strategies to do so combined commodification and privatization processes with deregulation measures. In a similar vein, Lapavistas (2014) contends that “neoliberalism is not truly hostile to the state”, but it intends to “take

over the state and use it to apply neoliberal policies” that have been crucial to foster financialization (2014: 7). And, as the cases presented in this article have shown, the strategy to do so consists on “altering the regulatory and supervisory framework of finance” (2014: 9)¹⁹, not only in the sense of lifting regulations – of interest rates, of the kinds of activities banks were allowed to engage in, and of international capital flows –, but also by introducing “a profusion of systematic state intervention to sustain financialization”, thus adopting a “regulatory and interventionist attitude” that seems to be at odds with common-sense assumptions of the nature of neoliberal states (2014: 11).

In this article, the focus has been put on the role of the Spanish state in fostering or curbing the financialization of housing, in the context of the current housing crisis, and the responses to it. Drawing on the cases of several legal and policy reforms, and their effects on housing rights and conditions, we have illustrated how the state – at its several administrative levels – has oscillated among different attitudes towards financial extraction. These attitudes may determine an inclination to intervene the economy in some sense, ranging from the blatant promotion of the interests of real-estate and banking lobbies, to some degree of interference with financial accumulation projects in the aim of protecting housing rights. This interference, however, has tended to be timid, probably, as Tsingou (2014) notes, because reforms have been designed by the same “policy community” who is to blame for the crisis, and who is part of transnational networks (or “clubs”) promoting the interests of the financial industry, which entails the exclusion of potentially dissident voices and reinforces the hegemony of “conservative and technocratic regulatory bodies” (Kalaitzake 2015) on which financiers have kept a strong influence. Similarly to what Trampusch (2019) has shown for the financialization of sovereign debt management, also in the case of the financialization of housing legislation and policy making has been framed by orthodox economists, and politicians and civil servants have been lobbied by finance.

Besides all this, non-interventionist attitudes, that at first sight might match better neoliberal orthodoxy, are in fact located in a force field where financial actors depart from a privileged position, which determines that the alleged impartiality of *laissez-faire* politics, rather than being innocuous, results in the perpetuation of pre-existing privileges, and in the legitimation

19. Alongside monetary policies also mentioned by Lapavitsas as another cornerstone of the state’s promotion of financialization, but that have not been the object of our inquiry here.

of outcomes favourable to them – and very adverse to the victims of housing crises – as the natural or unavoidable products of market dynamics. We have also shown how, in the rare cases where the state has acted to impede or alleviate financial extraction in the housing arena and the social harms derived from it, reforms have arrived late, often as a result of public pressure, and their fragility has limited them to the status of partial and ephemeral disruptions in the advance of the frontier of financialization. As a result, such reforms have failed to reverse the drivers of the housing crisis, its chronification for a significant part of the population, and its likeable replication in the future.

Nevertheless, accounts of the collaboration of the state with financialization processes should not be simplistic, as such collaboration, already identified long ago as a class alliance by Marxist economists (Mattioli 2020: 5) and more recently by anthropologists (Graeber 2014: 75), does not occur in a monolithic way, but through a variety of mechanisms, as Kalaitzake (2018) has shown through his analysis of the relations between the financial sector and central banks. A complex account of the matter should therefore reflect the contingency and contradictions of state regulation and oversight of finance (Aalbers 2009), and even of the direct involvement of the state -understood not as a monolithic agent but as compounded of multiple layers and distinct agencies – in the housing-finance nexus (Yeşilbağ 2020). By describing the complexities of several empirical cases of state (in)action, our aim has been to illustrate the contradictory and nonlinear way in which this occurs; indeed, in our examples, “state institutions at different scales and with different responsibilities have often acted in diametrically opposing ways” (Aalbers 2019: 11). In addition, we have identified as well the importance of lobbies and the difficulties to counter financialization trends, for “in a financialized political environment it will be difficult (but not necessarily impossible) to get anything done that runs counter to the expected benefits of the most powerful group” (Aalbers 2019: 12). The efforts of two Spanish social movements, the *PAH* and the *Sindicat de Llogateres*, emerged in two distinct moments of the housing crisis, can be understood as attempts at countering the successive actions of lobbies in the financial and real estate fields. With all this in mind, legal reforms and housing policies can be interpreted as contributing either to the advance of finance, to the perpetuation of its internal consistency, or to the partial resolution of its contradictions giving way to mutations and reinventions in new social and political scenarios.

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Disruption, interrupted

Startups and social challenges in a government accelerator

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ABSTRACT: This article investigates how the dual demands of finance and social impact affect the relationships of founders to disruption, as a rhetorical function, material goal and relational context. Building on recent studies of innovation and entrepreneurship such as Bardinelli (2019), Irani (2019) and Lindtner (2020), the article offers a nuanced view of disruption that complicates unidimensional narratives of financialization as a singular force and accounts for the complexity of reconciling financial and social interests. Based on data gathered at a startup participating in a government-funded accelerator program in Melbourne, Australia, we analyse how the logics of finance impact entrepreneurial experience in an early-stage social enterprise startup. Our data suggests that, in their attempts to attract the attention and funding of financial investors, founders of early-stage startups focus more on proving the value of their disruption in a rhetorical sense than on refining the materially disruptive potential of their products to ensure real world social impact. By analysing disruption through a relational lens, we identify four layers of disruption (product innovation; social value; financial return; and labour relations) to which early-stage startups are aligned, and through which their products and personal lives are transformed.

KEYWORDS: ACCELERATOR PROGRAMS; ENTREPRENEURSHIP; FINANCE; INNOVATION; STARTUPS



*Introduction*¹

On a wet afternoon in early March 2020, right before the first wave of Covid-19 in Australia, we sat down to lunch with Jasper, the founder of GoYou! – a startup designed to help young people get active. It had been a hot and challenging summer. Devastating bushfires raging across the country had cloaked the cities of Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne in thick clouds of toxic smoke. Despite this gloomy context, and the worrying news of what will become the Covid19 pandemic filtering from overseas, Jasper was in good spirits. Like the rain, which welcomed a new season and washed away the ashy residue on the city streets, he and his co-founder Stephen felt that they were about to turn a page in their professional life. In late 2019, their startup had been accepted into the GovTech Labs accelerator program, a social impact startup incubator funded by the Victorian state government. Responding to a “challenge” put forward by one of the government departments involved, GoYou! was finally starting to gain some traction with stakeholders and potential customers. Jasper told us:

In December, I was about to give up. We had been struggling for so long to get funding. It was really tough. But then GovTech came along and it was great. Now things are happening!

Reflecting on the four years he had spent pursuing a business idea without any financial returns, Jasper insisted on the higher purpose of the venture: inspiring young people. He spoke passionately about the sense of satisfaction he felt from following a social objective, rather than working for a big company where he felt like he was “a cog in a machine”. Jasper, like many other entrepreneurs we had worked with in Melbourne, understood the products and services of his company as having a direct social impact. Introducing a new technology onto the market, for these founders, meant hitting the jackpot: receiving the attention of financial investors and using their money to develop solutions oriented towards positive social outcomes which also ensured solid economic returns.

For Jasper, creating a “disruptive” technology (and more, generally, disruption) meant building a tool able to harness the power of finance and generate radical, positive social change. This perception resonates with the global discourse promoting innovation, where columns in Forbes (Jackson 2019), the

1. We would like to thank Lauren Kate Kelly for her thoughtful contributions to the theoretical framing of this article in the early stages of writing.

Harvard Business Review (Martin, Kemper 2012; Chirstensen 2015), and other mainstream media publications (Kalifa 2020) routinely cite industry leaders and tech gurus who, under the rubric of “disruption”, boast of the potential of innovation to transform the market, and, in the process, the world. Recently, a growing number of public institutions, including in the EU (Mattioli 2021), India (Irani 2019), and China (Lindtner 2020), have been targeting the creation of tech-based innovation ecosystems as a pillar of economic policy to solve issues of unemployment and deliver sustainable, green technologies – making “disruption” not only a tech mantra, but also one increasingly present in public policies.

Australia firmly entered the arms race of startup innovation in 2015 when then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull announced the National Innovation and Science Agenda (NISA) with the slogan: “Ideas Boom”. Conjuring a series of economic policies aimed at stimulating innovation and disruption, the NISA propelled the development of accelerator programs, incubators, and innovation districts across the country, capturing the imagination of tech entrepreneurs and investors and contributing to the rapid growth of the Australia startup sector. Just four years after the launch of the NISA, the Techboard Funding Report for the financial year 2018-19 recorded almost AU\$7 billion in startup investment, up from AU\$3.5 billion in the previous year.

Policies such as the NISA assume that the positive outcomes of disruption can be elicited by increasing the capital available to startups. However, the example of several late-stage startups suggests that these seed funding opportunities only act as catalyzers – enabling startups to attract larger venture capital funds or investors. In doing so, companies can become preoccupied with financial capital and forget, or even renege on, their original promises to generate positive social change. In many cases, this results in the simple commercialisation of a socially ambitious idea. In others, the pressures of finance can conjure very different social outcomes. For instance, pyramid and Ponzi schemes create heightened expectations of success that interrupt the typical social order (Cox 2013). These fast money schemes intersperse the everyday with hopes for financial returns that vindicate a society’s perceived flaws, including its postcolonial marginality, through the quasi-mystic action of political, and sometimes religious, leaders (see also Verdery 1995; Musaraj 2020). The disruptive component of finance is key to the success of fast money schemes: the ability to conjure wealth almost out of nothing becomes the primary tool through which individuals build their social fortunes (Cox 2018).

Ponzi schemes, however, are not the only outcome of disruptive innovation. In this article, we explore the practical life of disruption, as lived by startups that operate in the context of Melbourne, Australia – a place that is geographically peripheral, and yet central to many financial processes (Startup Genome 2022). We ask: how do early-stage startup founders navigate the multiple demands of financial investors and social impact in their pursuit of disruptive innovation? And how do these demands transform and *interrupt* the professional goals of startups and the personal lives of founders? The data gathered from our study suggests that, despite the performed commitment to social change, the focus of early-stage startups tends to be centred on the expectations of financial investors. We applied a relational, rather than ideological lens to our analysis of the data and came to understand disruption as functioning on different planes; layers to be negotiated by founders depending on the demands of external stakeholders. These layers of disruption took four key forms: first, as a business goal based on product innovation; second, the delivery of social benefit and public value; third, fulfilling the expectations of financial investors; and fourth, the transformation of labour relations beyond corporate methodologies. Ultimately, to convince investors to fund their enterprises, founders find themselves dedicating more energy to proving the value of their disruption in a rhetorical sense than to refining the materially disruptive potential of their products to ensure real world social impact.

The process of negotiating the demands of finance and social impact produce contradictory reverberations in founders' own subjectivities. In appearance, founders seem to embody the quintessential neoliberal subject, happy to justify the perceived precarity of their entrepreneurial condition as a liberating process, an opportunity to escape the grind of corporate jobs in favour of a more creative entrepreneurial enterprise. In practice, however, the more they pursue the expectations of financial investors, the more they abandon innovative working methodologies – replicating instead methodologies of work found in traditional corporate structures. This suggests that, while the impact of financial expectations does affect the overall direction of what founders pursue, it does not necessarily rewrite their subjectivities – instead, it seems to produce a more kaleidoscopic, fragmented selfhood.

Research context and methodology

This research is grounded in the context of the GovTech Labs, in Melbourne, Australia, where we worked closely with GoYou! (as well as other startups) over

a period of eight months in 2019-2020. Unlike other accelerators, which may receive some public funding yet rely on venture capital or angel investment, the GovTech program explicitly mobilises public funds from the Victorian state government to inspire private innovation. However, while this state funding certainly *inspires* innovation, it is not enough to support founders to fully develop their products. As such, while GovTech Labs sees its goal as that of enabling government and startups to work together to solve challenges that affect the public good, entrepreneurs remain preoccupied by the demands of finance, courting other investors to ensure that they can meet the challenges set by the government. In theory, the entrepreneurs and government bodies work together to co-design and fund solutions to a set of social impact priority areas identified by the government, for example: supporting gig workers in safe working practices; helping businesses reduce food waste; or improving disease prevention. The structure of the accelerator thus reflects the goals of social entrepreneurship, which look for ethical solutions, rather than simply wealth creation (Cohen, Katz 2016). In practice, however, the desire to simultaneously accumulate personal wealth, build a sustainable company for a broader market, and enact social good creates significant tensions and contradictions (Bandinelli 2019). While creating “social value” may be seen as the primary goal of publicly supported entrepreneurship, the reality of securing funding, meeting investors’ expectations and achieving certain metrics can bring a number of divergent and even oppositional goals into focus.

GovTech Labs operates as a three-month-long accelerator program which provides entrepreneurs an initial AU\$30,000 funding, mentorship, and a co-working space in exchange for their commitment to help solve pre-approved societal “challenges”. The final step of the process allows entrepreneurs the chance to secure a further AU\$150,000 – a generous amount of money which, nevertheless, is insufficient to build a fully functioning company. The monetary aspect is undoubtedly a driving factor for entrepreneurs’ desires to work with GovTech and it was clear that some founders within the program, including the founders of GoYou!, effectively “moulded” their ventures to fit within the scope of the challenges set by the government. In the case of GoYou!, Jasper and his co-founder Stephen initially envisioned creating an app that would enable women in their late 20s and early 30s to “live their best lives” through ongoing moral support. However, there was no challenge at GovTech Labs geared towards this demographic or particular social issue. Instead, there was one aimed at increasing physical activity among

teenagers. Jasper and Stephen thus pivoted their idea and pitched an app that would allow a wide range of individuals to create challenges and complete them with virtual moral support. Our work with GoYou! commenced when they were accepted into the GovTech Labs program and was part of a larger collaborative research project (established by Richards and Mattioli) beginning in 2018 and comprising an ethnographic investigation into the lives of startups in Melbourne, Australia. We were interested in exploring the experiences of early-stage founders in what is colloquially known as the “Valley of Death” – the period between first rounds of funding and economic viability. Over time, the study and the team expanded to include economists, management scholars, and other anthropologists. In 2019, we began to examine the overall trajectory of startups in the Melbourne entrepreneurial ecosystem, focusing on how founders move into and out of support networks, including accelerator and incubator programs. In late 2019, Sellers joined the research team and conducted a four-month internship with GoYou! following their acceptance into the GovTech accelerator program.

Our research across the larger project took a diluted and longitudinal approach. Compared with other recent ethnographic studies of innovation companies (see Irani 2019; Johnson 2019; Kelman 2018; Lindtner 2020), our research was not situated within the everyday activities of a specific startup. Rather, our fieldwork followed the trajectory of startups at regular intervals over 6-12 months and was conducted in parallel with other professional activities, including teaching, administrative work, and personal commitments. In this part of the study, our usual methods were supplemented by the intensive internship undertaken by Sellers (made digital because of the “working from home” requirements imposed by Covid-19). As a recent graduate, Sellers took on a part-time, two days a week position at GoYou! where she worked alongside four other interns supporting the growth of the nascent company. Activities performed by Sellers included surveying potential customers for user research, compiling data and desk research findings, and producing pitch deck materials. Throughout the internship, Richards and Mattioli met with Sellers once a fortnight to discuss findings, provide mentoring and offer support in engagement with GoYou! founders. The collaborative rapport fostered during the internship experience provided deep ethnographic insights into the human-centered aspects of this startup, the relationship of the founders to the accelerator program and their negotiations with the competing demands of financial investors and social impact advisors.

It is important to note that, while the broader research project engaged with founders of varying social and economic backgrounds, and of different genders, the two founders at the centre of this article are middle-class, cis-gendered, white men. This demographic does not represent the larger scope of our research. However, it is representative of the startup world more generally and of the Melbourne innovation ecosystem in particular, where, in 2020, approximately 80% of all startup founders were men (LaunchVic 2020). Further, the experiences of these founders, whilst certainly individual, are nevertheless representative of much of what other founders we spoke with in the Melbourne ecosystem observe and experience. The social arrangements of individual founders differ; yet the fundamental dynamics regarding the impact of financial pressures are very similar – allowing many of the entrepreneurs we worked with to embrace disruption as a both an ideological and strategical framework to navigate the contradictions they experience.

In the sections that follow, we first frame the relevance of disruption within theories of entrepreneurship and financialization. Second, we describe the multiple forms or layers of disruption that we saw entrepreneurs pursuing in their work. Third, we highlight how the demands involved in proving their worth to financial investors shifted the focus of the founders away from refining their product or delivering social value and, ultimately, pushed them to abandon innovative ways of working – finding refuge in more consolidated “corporate” working processes.

Framing disruption

“Disruption”, especially when understood in relation to financial flows and entrepreneurship, constitutes a conceptual frontline between three intellectual traditions. Amongst scholars of entrepreneurship, for instance, disruption and its broader conceptual field are generally understood as a force that ushers in (positive) change. Since Schumpeter’s *Theory of Economic Development* (1911), disruption has been seen as a fundamental characteristic of innovation, framing the kind of “creative destruction” that savvy entrepreneurs can turn into productive opportunities (1942). Other influential theorists of entrepreneurship, such as Knight (1921) and Drucker (1985), have extended this work, highlighting the inherent risk and uncertainty that accompany the opportunities of disruption, while others (see Christensen 1997) have drawn attention to the strategic reasons why new “entrants” can take over market segments forgotten by established leaders.

Over time, scholars of entrepreneurship began to question the idea that disruption is, necessarily and naturally, an opportunity. Starting from a constructivist framework, this second line of inquiry became more concerned with explaining the social, cultural, and economic assumptions that made “disruption” desirable. Marwick (2013), for instance, sees “disruption” in the startup world not as a generic force, but as a by-product of a specific “California Ideology”, built on a foundation of “technological determinism and libertarian individualism” (see also Barbrook, Cameron 1996). This characterization amplifies arguments within the anthropology of finance (Ho 2009; Zaloom 2006), which demonstrate that a key component in the socialization of white-collar investors, brokers, and bankers, is precisely the normalization of disruption – one of the factors that, in the Global North, contributed to the build-up of increasingly risky, unsecured, financial products (see Souleles 2019).

But what happens to one’s existential space once (financial) disruption is no longer confined to the elite and is normalized as a key social habitus throughout society? For ethnographers influenced by Polanyi, the answer is social devastation (see Polanyi 1944; Ho 2009; Graeber 2011). From this perspective, disruption is neither an opportunity, nor a cultural fact. Instead, it constitutes a broader state of crisis, where gaming the disruption of financial markets generates widespread and violent forms of dispossession across local communities. To adapt to this new landscape of risk and financialized capitalism, individuals are *forced* to become entrepreneurial. Rather than opportunities, here disruption ushers in new forms of domination, which leave little choice but to embrace new forms of individuality – where one’s own identity is re-fashioned and conceived as a “brand” (Gershon 2016).

As an opportunity, a cultural leitmotif, or a force that remoulds subjectivity, disruption defines the relational space that entrepreneurs build (or break), as they try to navigate the speculative diktats of financial capital. For those who experience it as filled with potentiality, as founders and startups often do, disruption articulates the relationships they try to build with investors – by indulging in speculative future outcomes or by materializing their future revenues, successes, and wealth (Roitman 2023; Hayden, Muir 2022; Mattioli, 2023). But it also identifies other relationships (to their selves, their co-workers, their mentors) that emerge, evolve, and often disappear quickly during the pursuit of ephemeral financial gains. As Lindtner (2020: 14), citing Benjamin (2019), remarks, “when tech companies propagate the mantra of disruption, acceleration, and breakage, the ‘people and places broken in the process’ are

enrolled in an enticing story of market development and progress”. Disruption, in other words, forces us to focus on the relationships that constitute the “narrating” as well as the “breaking” – and enable startups to transform those broken pieces.

When analysed through relational lenses instead of ideological definitions, disruption can be understood as a bundle of different practices. In the case of startups within social impact programs such as those enrolled in GovTech Labs, the imperative to shift market dynamics is accompanied with the simultaneous demand to bring about positive social change. For companies like GoYou!, disruption means aligning at least four different layers of aspirational transformation. First, building an innovative product that can attract users and/or customers. Second, delivering specific kinds of social value as defined by the program. Third, fulfilling the expectations of a variety of financial investors. And, finally, building a company where working can be fulfilling and pleasurable thanks to its innovative (i.e. non-corporate) labour methodologies. It is the tension between these layers of transformation that we’ll explore in the following pages.

Beyond the hype: layers of disruption

To stand out in the crowd, startups must find dramatic ways to convey their “economic performance...[and] draw an audience of potential investors. The more spectacular the conjuring, the more possible an investment frenzy” (Tsing 2000: 118). The vocabulary of disruption is, often, a key part of this spectacular financial alchemy. For example, the famously charismatic founder of co-working and “consciousness raising” company WeWork, Adam Neumann projected a captivating portrait of future success, wealth creation and positive social outcomes by proclaiming: “We’re definitely not a real-estate company... We are a community of creators [who] leverage technology to connect people... And it’s a new way of working. Just like Uber is the sharing economy for cars, and Citibike for bicycles, we’re the sharing economy for space” (Rothstein 2021). This ambitious evocation of disruptive triumph allowed Neumann to secure both financial and cultural capital. Included in TIME magazine’s list of 100 most influential people in 2018 and anointed “the planet’s next great tech CEO” by SoftBank Group CEO Masayoshi Son, at the height of its meteoric rise, Neumann’s WeWork reached a valuation of close to fifty billion dollars (Brown, Farrell 2021). And yet, when the lack of substance behind his bluster

was exposed, the “value” of the company quickly evaporated. As critics remarked, “the only thing WeWork disrupted was itself” (Kepes 2021).

The dream of becoming a “unicorn” preoccupied the imaginary of disruption deployed by many of the Melburnian startups we worked with. However, founders also embedded this horizon with other, more pragmatic, meanings. First, founders framed disruption as a *business goal*, which would enable them to develop new, innovative products that would deliver “value” to their users and (paying) customers. For GoYou! co-founder Stephen, this meant producing an app that would encourage “users to be their best selves”. By offering challenges and social tasks that encouraged users to become more physically active, GoYou! aimed to disrupt users’ views of their daily activities, pushing them “to step outside their comfort zone [to generate] personal self-development”. Jasper and Stephen saw the self-actualization offered by GoYou! as a solution to a social problem, able to *combine* financial profit with public good. For Jasper, this second dimension of disruption was about *social value*. The goal was not to amass great quantities of capital; rather, he aimed to “have enough” to be financially stable and be able to build “something of value” not only to him, but to society at large. As he put it:

It’s about having people use this in a very positive way in their life. The material side of that is that I build something of value, it pays me, I sell it or whatever, financial stability, especially with a family mortgage. Personally, I hate money. I’ve always seen money as something that makes people miserable, but I do see it also as an enabler. On the material side I just want to have enough so that I don’t have to worry. I think worrying about money is one of the life stresses I can do without.

However, what counted as social benefit or as financially viable depended on a wide variety of investors and supporters. In this third sense, disruption was about *financial returns*: striking a balance between social benefit and financial viability that would satisfy the different stakeholders GoYou! was engaged with as a member of GovTech Labs. Unlike other accelerator programs, where investments were immediately provided by the program or through its business networks, GovTech sourced and coached startups to address specific needs identified by government departments. In the first instance, then, GoYou! was required to address a specific “challenge” put forward by a department, working with public officials who, in dialogue with GovTech, evaluated their progress.

For startups, this was both a boon and a curse. Unlike other investors, government departments were directly engaged in helping startups achieve their

goals and had already set aside AU\$150,000 to invest in the startups. At the same time, public servants tended to evaluate the startups' ability to deliver social value in "the same way they approached a procurement contract", as the Manager of GovTech told us. If department officials and the startup had agreed on, say, having 500 users by the end of the program, this criterium could become set in stone. But, for most startups at GovTech Labs, including GoYou!, early indicators and measurements could not be meaningful once they iterated their ideas. GoYou!, for instance, found it hard to access teenagers – they struggled to receive permission by official institutions to talk to teenagers, despite government official's offers of support.

Moreover, as the Manager of GovTech manager told us, following those targets, or building custom-made solutions that delivered "public good" as understood by government officials might not have been in the best interest of the company's future. While AU\$150,000 was a good seed fund, it was, generally, not enough money to enable the founders to quit their jobs or fully develop the product. Even at GovTech Labs, founders had to court other investors, and leverage the early momentum from government funding to attract market investors. These, in turn, might not be interested in the specific market segment or solutions that government officials wanted. In the case of GoYou! this meant considering a different layer of disruption – one that had to do with collecting data about what truly motivated users and packaging it for marketing purposes.

In this process, founders hoped to achieve a fourth dimension of disruption – namely, to transform the *labour relations* of their own working conditions. Startups we worked with attempted to disrupt corporate employment structures and deliver their solutions through agile methods that embodied their progressive values and aims for social transformation – while also signalling their ability to be nimble to external audiences. At GoYou!, this meant creating a working environment that matched the core values of the company: fun loving, open to trying new things and living loudly. The idea was that, if the office environment was progressive and innovative, then the company's ability to reach its substantial target would follow suit. In practice, this meant, first and foremost, getting rid of meetings. Instead, every Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday, the team had a 15-30-minute "stand-up" check-in sessions which, as Stephen and Jasper repeatedly told us, were *not* regular meetings. As Stephen put it, meetings are "time-wasting, whereas stand-ups are direct. It's a sign of how we do things differently".

The (oversized) significance that Jasper and Stephen assigned to using stand-ups, instead of meetings, had its roots in their own professional background and aspirations. Prior to establishing GoYou!, both founders had been working full-time jobs with significant benefits and some degree of financial stability. And yet, they were dissatisfied. They felt that their corporate roles fostered a lack of control and creativity in their daily lives. Jasper told us, with only a hint of humour in his voice, that his corporate job made him want to “slit [his] wrists”. He described his days as mind-numbing and depressing. If, in the corporate world, he was a “mindless worker”, then entrepreneurship offered him an opportunity to embrace a kind of “lone-wolf spirit” (Engstrom 2012: 50) and invest in his dreams of innovative solutions to complex social dilemmas (Croitoru *et al.* 2017). For Jasper, building a disruptive company offered independence and self-determination, imbuing his life with dignity and purposefulness. He told us:

I don't want to sit in an office for 20 years to guarantee that I can pay for my house and my meals, there's more to life than that. I want to be able to experience that. A lot of people love structure, love security. I'm a different type of beast to a lot of people.

At GovTech Labs, many agreed: trading the security of corporate careers for the risk brought by pursuing disruption made sense, as it bestowed a sense of freedom, autonomy and “purpose” by allowing them to create something new and of value.

The contradictions of disruption

Delivering value to users, building a company that “does good” and pays the bills, satisfying investors, and building an innovative and meaningful work environment: for the founders we worked with, the true meaning of disruption consisted in combining these different layers of action. In practice, however, startups often found themselves unable to juggle these contradictory goals and forced to abandon some of these objectives. GoYou!, for instance, quickly began to prioritize the company's material gains over its social goals. As much as Jasper claimed to despise money, much of his time was spent thinking about it: securing funding, calculating users' retention and interviews, measuring potential profits and losses. The concern with money was so pervasive that it constituted a key horizon for many of his jokes.

This was a familiar narrative within Melbourne's entrepreneurial ecosystem. Companies with longstanding commitments to products and founders

dedicated to developing socially impactful companies found it very hard to maintain focus. On their own, they often got lost in the challenges of everyday life. When supported by an accelerator program, however, they came under increasing pressure to rapidly raise capital, get to market, and scale as quickly as possible (Richards, Mattioli forthcoming). Within a very short period, where they often worked multiple jobs, founders had to convince potential investors that their idea worked – enough to not only solve a challenge, but also be profitable, and, most importantly, scalable. Many accelerators, including GovTech, encouraged companies such as GoYou! to approach this conundrum by conducting user research. Accelerator managers reasoned that startups needed to test whether their products were going to be useful for their intended users – and that they could leverage those insights to change their products before they became too expensive (or difficult) to modify, and to showcase market potential to investors. Founders, on the other hand, had very little time or energy to conduct interviews and found it very challenging to switch off from their usual “pitching mode”. Anxious to prove their idea, and pressed to showcase phantasmagorical financial returns, founders like Jasper and Stephen struggled to listen to potential users without attempting to convince them of their solution. Often, this resulted in postponing, or delegating user research, which was read as an inconvenience, rather than a key factor for the improvement of the product – at least, until they realized that they needed sources of data for the consumption of investors.

As an intern, Sellers conducted user interviews on behalf of GoYou!. She prioritised quality insights from potential users, assuming that their feedback would play an important role in the evolution of the business. However, for the founders, the *number* of interviews seemed more important than their content. While the interns, including Sellers, spent many hours organizing, facilitating, transcribing, and analysing these user interviews, and the interviews uncovered important insights about the value of the app, Jasper and Stephen did not use the data to refine their product. This was not a problem of closed-mindedness. Indeed, Stephen and Jasper were open to hearing the critical findings of the user research. However, they were *more* invested in using the data to make an impressive case to GovTech Labs stakeholders and potential investors than in applying the findings to the development of the app itself.

In the final weeks of the program, Sellers was asked if she could help Jasper find some poignant “quotes” and “anecdotes” that would validate the business’s “value proposition” and look good on a PowerPoint presentation.

He told her: “Now, we don’t want you to massage the data, but can you find some quotes which will match the points we’re trying to make?” By turning the interview data into quantitative indicators, rather than focusing on its qualitative dimensions, ambitions of scalability took precedence over other considerations. As Jasper put it, in a moment of honesty and resignation, the whole interview process was not really about rethinking the app – or even discussing whether an app was what was really necessary, as some of the interviews had suggested. Instead, it was merely “a numbers game”, necessary to justify their progress to the government officials, appease coaches and mentors, and attract the next batch of investors.

GoYou! also faced a second level of contradictions. As the insistence on “stand-ups” and an “agile” working environment suggested, Jasper and Stephen considered their startup adventure as an alternative to traditional corporate working conditions, where they could reclaim a sense of independence and self-determination. In practice, however, the ideal entrepreneurial subject becomes a “self-exploited worker” (Rolnik 2011), working longer hours than ever. As Jasper told us at one stage: “I’m really struggling at the moment because I’ve been doing 12 hours a day most days and you need a spatula to get me out of bed in the morning”. Sellers also found that the stand-ups at GoYou! involved agendas, hierarchies and power dynamics familiar to corporate office environments. For instance, stand-ups presented Jasper and Stephen as always busy, and gave credence to their claim that they were unable to find the time to discuss the substance of the research. Yet, during these meetings, they spent extended periods of time digressing, joking, complaining about their challenges, rehearsing discussions about a single issue, or offering updates. Other staff, meanwhile, listened silently on the Zoom call, in the best tradition of corporate meetings.

Women who worked at GoYou! felt particularly limited in their ability to participate. While Stephen liked to stress the progressive values of the company, Sellers realized that young, female interns were routinely interrupted by their male colleagues or the founders themselves. Often, their ideas were dismissed, while remarks by male interns were acknowledged and taken seriously. Sarah, who had worked as an intern at the company, told Sellers that research she had conducted had ended up on the GoYou! website, but her work had never been acknowledged by the founders, either in public, or in stand-ups or more formal meetings. Overall, Sellers felt that GoYou! embodied a sort of “tech-bro” working culture. Here, disruption coexisted and at times replicated

corporate hierarchies and emphasized male-dominated social codes (see also Richards, Mattioli 2020). This, in turn, had paradoxical effects on the “innovative” product itself. Sarah recalled that, in their first iteration of the app, the landing screen welcomed young women with the phrase “Hey Gorgeous”. Sarah highlighted how, when people used that expression to greet her, it had always made her feel uncomfortable. Yet, when she raised this with Jasper and Stephen, they seemed oblivious to, even uninterested in, these gendered implications. Similarly, young adults who spoke with Sellers, suggested that they might feel uncomfortable with GoYou!’s core idea of creating challenges. Several young males feared it would replicate a form of competitive masculinity that they were uncomfortable with and were trying to avoid. When Sellers explained this to Jasper and Stephen, however, the conversation became surreal. First, she struggled to get their attention. Then, the founders seemed to completely miss the point, suggesting that they wanted the app to have a “Jamie Oliver” feel, before beginning to brainstorm how to use the user data to further their cause with public officials – only to be mortified when realizing the implications at a later date.

Conclusion

Beyond its rhetoric and shiny façade, the vocabulary of disruption encapsulates a variety of different, and sometimes contradictory, goals and outcomes. Social impact companies like GoYou! derive part of their allure precisely from their purposed ability to combine useful products with financial returns and meaningful, non-traditional working conditions. Yet, these objectives are framed by the need to receive investments and meeting the expectations of investors – in this case, public officials as well as private fund managers. To capture financial interest, in other words, startups need to straddle contradictory goals and objectives. On the one hand, the impetus to build a good product; on the other, the need to prove their solutions at all costs. Here, the wish to develop a more empowering, inclusive workplace; there, a replica of vertical, corporate hierarchy, with a clear gendered component.

These contradictions, and their outcomes, highlight the dynamic relationality that emerges to accommodate, but also challenge, the needs of financial investors – indeed, the paradoxical outcomes of the movements and counter-movement of finance. At GoYou!, founders frequently found not only their professional goals and personal lives but also their very pursuit of disruptive innovation interrupted by the demands of finance. Throughout our study, it

was clear that the focus of early-stage startups is less committed to the ambitions of social change, and more to the expectations of (potential) investors. The contradictory experiences these founders encountered – trying to embody the financialized self; ready to brand themselves on the demand of investors; and replicating the stale, corporate relationalities they so vociferously detested – highlighted the need to understand entrepreneurship and, more broadly, financialization as inherently relational.

Within the entrepreneurial ecosystem, disruption does not play a merely rhetorical function. Rather, it constitutes a material goal and relational context. Attending to the contradictory demands and outcomes of disruption in all its forms – as well the impacts on founders and startups involved in its pursuit – is necessary to better understand how startups navigate simultaneous financial and social interests, especially in their early-stages. Furthermore, if entrepreneurship is to remain committed to the ideological concept of disruption, it must also confront the exclusion such commitment engenders, especially when it comes to the labour relations and working conditions within startup spaces. Only by *interrupting* the impulse to disrupt for disruptions sake might the entrepreneurial ecosystem edge towards a more genuinely transformative approach to business, work and life.

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Residui sacrali nei musei

Un'etnografia della membrana del patrimonio religioso di Taiwan

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Sacred residues in museums. A membrane ethnography of Taiwanese religious heritage

ABSTRACT: This article reflects on the existing dynamics between the sacredness derived from the museumification of religious items and the sacredness of those artefacts employed in rituals that survive in museum spaces as a trace or *sacred residue* (Beekers 2016). Which sacrality predominates, and how do they influence each other? Through an ethnography conducted in several Taiwanese museums, the article probes into a stratification of sacralities: the encounter between Buddhist and Chinese religious practitioners with museum artefacts' sacred residue reflects complex and unpredictable dynamics. The ethnography presented in this article is defined as *membrane ethnography* since the relationship between humans and matter is like a membrane that unites and simultaneously separates, filters and subjectifies. This article extends the meaning of sacred residue by examining the reproducibility of religious artefacts through technological or experiential means. The latter, rather than determining the artefacts' inauthenticity, makes the sacred residue more explicit. Furthermore, the ethnography of the membrane shows how non-European contexts are permeated by porosity and interdependency between the secular and the sacred of religious heritage, thus preventing a dichotomisation between museums and ritual contexts for analysing the implied dynamics between them instead.

KEYWORDS: SACRED RESIDUE; RELIGIOUS HERITAGE; RELIGIOUS MUSEUMS; ETHNOGRAPHY OF MEMBRANE; TAIWAN

*Paradossi e ingiunzioni*¹

“Questa chiesa non è un museo!” “Questo museo non è un luogo di culto!” Si tratta d’ingiunzioni prescritte che spesso nelle nostre esperienze di turisti e fruitori del patrimonio culturale abbiamo incontrato. La necessità di specificare la destinazione d’uso dei due luoghi, uno per il culto, l’altro per la cultura, fa pensare al fatto che la materia sacra e quella museale tenderebbero, invece, a confondersi tra loro e influenzarsi vicendevolmente. Infatti, si legge di sale museali, qui in Europa o altrove, dove i visitatori cercano di toccare le icone religiose, giungono le mani in segno di preghiera o si tolgono le scarpe prima di entrare in una sala come se stessero facendo il loro ingresso in un tempio buddhista o in una moschea (Berns 2016; Bhatti 2016; Wingfield 2010). Viceversa, i luoghi di culto, sia in Europa che altrove, sono visitati e fruiti come beni patrimoniali, interferendo con le attività di culto o, viceversa, sanzionando quest’ultime come irrispettose del o dannose rispetto al valore patrimoniale e culturale di un bene religioso (Palumbo 2004; Fisher 2011).

Questo articolo intende interrogarsi sui paradossi della materia sacra all’interno dei musei. Tuttavia, la prospettiva dell’articolo non è quella inaugurata da un fiorente filone accademico a cavallo tra antropologia e studi religiosi (Duncan 1995; Berns 2016; Buggeln, Paine, Plate 2017; Paine 2000, 2020), che ha messo a confronto le somiglianze e reciproche influenze tra musei e luoghi di culto basandosi prevalentemente sulle collezioni di musei europei o nordamericani di provenienza europea (Minucciani 2013; Ariese 2020) o extra-europea (Tythacott 2011, 2017; Sullivan 2015; Meyer 2021). L’articolo, infatti, presenterà una ricerca condotta in musei taiwanesi, inserendosi quindi all’interno di una serie di lavori, etnografici o museografici, incentrati su forme museologiche extra-europee portate avanti da gruppi religiosi specifici (Wilke, Guggenmos 2008; Kreps 2014; Mathur, Singh, 2015; McDaniel 2017; Tythacott, Bellini 2020; Sai 2022). In tali forme museologiche, si può evincere sia un collezionismo e una trasmissione trans-generazionale della memoria culturale propri e originali, sia determinate modalità espositive, in parte ereditate dalla migrazione del modello europeo di museo, in parte riflettenti le interazioni rituali con la materia sacra, e che si ripropongono, in proporzioni diverse, all’interno sia dello spazio museale propriamente detto, sia dello spazio rituale del tempio.

1. Un ringraziamento sentito va a Chiara Calzana e Roberto Brigati, per i loro commenti e consigli su una prima stesura di questo articolo, e ai revisori anonimi di *Anuac* per aver ulteriormente rafforzato l’articolo con le loro osservazioni.

La prospettiva specifica dell'articolo rispetto alla letteratura prodotta finora in merito è sia teorica che metodologica: da un lato, il resoconto etnografico intende dialogare con il concetto di *residuo sacrale* (Beekers 2016); dall'altro, l'etnografia riflette quella che ho formulato come *etnografia della membrana*. Tale prospettiva specifica prende le mosse da una considerazione del sacro e del secolare come processi, politicamente ed etnograficamente situati, nei quali si creano vincoli, selezioni ed esclusioni tra persone e cose (Balkenhol, van den Hemel, Stengs 2020) e in cui la sacralità, anziché essere unicamente e strettamente identificabile con il religioso, è un concetto trasversale e socialmente fondato.

Secondo un'impostazione durkheimiana (Isnart, Cerezales 2020: 3), infatti, il sacro è una forza di coagulazione sociale che impegna una comunità a non violare l'oggetto sacro, a preservarlo in quanto coincidente con i suoi valori morali identitari. Proprio per questo suo carattere normativo, vincolante, prescrittivo e interdittivo (cfr. Fabietti 2014), l'oggetto sacro non deve essere necessariamente religioso: esso è sociale e distribuito nei vari aspetti della vita umana. Pensiamo, per esempio, a tutte le interdizioni che i visitatori di un museo sarebbero tenuti a seguire, prima fra tutti la proibizione di non toccare l'oggetto museale, la cui custodia e manipolazione è consentita soltanto a una casta di specialisti, curatori o restauratori. Più che di oggetto sacro, quindi, si può parlare di principio sacro che migra in più contesti (Isnart, Cerezales 2020: 3) e che aiuta a fare luce sulle complesse dinamiche legate all'esposizione della materia sacra nei musei.

Sulle tracce del residuo sacrale

Partendo, quindi, dal presupposto che, all'interno dei fenomeni di musealizzazione della materia sacra, vi siano due tipologie di sacralità, quella museale/patrimoniale, e quella religiosa, che interagiscono dinamicamente tra loro, la domanda che questa constatazione dovrebbe far scaturire è quale delle due sacralità abbia la meglio o, più in generale, come facciano a convivere e a essere compresenti. Il concetto di residuo sacrale (*sacred residue*) di Dan Beekers (2016: 39) è particolarmente utile come filo rosso teorico da tenere presente nell'analizzare il materiale taiwanese.

Il residuo sacrale descrive l'essenza di un sito religioso o di un insieme di manufatti presenti nel sito stesso che persiste – nella percezione di chi interagisce con il sito o con quei manufatti – dopo che quest'ultimo ha perso la sua funzione religiosa. I siti e le cose religiose che hanno dismesso quel siste-

ma dinamico che le teneva in vita come *materia sacra*, ovvero il rituale, sono altamente stratificati nel loro transitare da un contesto d'uso all'altro, ma la loro aura religiosa permane a livello profondo, stratigrafico, se vogliamo. In altre parole, vi è una memoria "materica" della loro sacralità che può essere più o meno avvertita dalle persone sulla base di esperienze, immaginazioni e memorie specifiche collegabili alla traccia sacrale. Gli interlocutori di Bekers parlano, per esempio, di una traccia odorosa impalpabile degli incensi accesi in passato nelle chiese sconsacrate. Si tratta quindi di un'aura sacrale che si manifesta sotto forma di una concatenazione di ritenzioni del sacro che condizionano le trasformazioni nei modi d'uso e d'interpretazione delle cose. Tale aura fa sì che un'eventuale rifunzionalizzazione delle chiese sconsacrate come *nightclub* incontri la riprovazione pubblica generale in quanto non consona al loro passato religioso. Tuttavia, questa traccia sacrale è estremamente variabile proprio in quanto si genera dall'incontro tra le cose e le persone, con il loro bagaglio (Berns 2017) esperienziale. Persone con esperienze religiose diverse potranno rinvenire, nello stesso manufatto religioso, un residuo sacrale diverso o non percepirlo affatto.

Il concetto di residuo sacrale è stato poi applicato in ambito museale da Birgit Meyer (2023). Secondo l'antropologa, la sopravvivenza del residuo sacrale nella patrimonializzazione degli oggetti religiosi, evidente, per esempio, in contesti post-coloniali nei quali i membri delle comunità religiose di provenienza dell'oggetto avvertono la forza del residuo sacrale nelle sale museali o nei depositi dove quest'ultimo si trova (Moulton 2018), è la dimostrazione che la cornice "secolare" del museo non ha il potere di neutralizzare l'oggetto sacro, ma piuttosto di stratificare più tipi di sacralità.

Questo articolo intende ulteriormente estendere l'applicabilità di residuo sacrale anche a quelle situazioni in cui l'oggetto sacro e lo spazio rituale sono riprodotti artificialmente, ovvero emulati senza riattivare una relazione rituale – come nel caso delle ricostruzioni di ambienti rituali in contesto museale europeo – o, viceversa, riproponendo la relazione rituale ma sotto forma di simulazione, di pratica rituale assistita, o con mezzi tecnologici (come schermi, dispositivi elettronici ecc.) come nel caso, vedremo, di alcuni musei taiwanesi. La riproposizione traslata dello spazio rituale è, in un certo senso, residuo sacrale, in quanto si ricopiano, riproducendoli e, in tal modo, ostentandoli, una serie di comportamenti rituali e religiosi comunemente associati a una relazione sensuale con la materia sacra, a prescindere che quest'ultima sia reale o meno. Si ha, quindi, un piano d'iperrealtà di alcune tipologie di residuo

sacrale (Wang, Gamberi 2023: 11). L'articolo intende rendere visibile questa resilienza o emulazione del sacro, ovvero il residuo sacrale, osservando il suo riverberarsi tra più strati o superfici, quello che spiegherò di seguito come *etnografia della membrana*.

Per un'etnografia della membrana

Gli antropologi non sono estranei all'impiego della metafora della membrana come metodo descrittivo e analitico del campo etnografico. Ad esempio, Jonas Tinius (2020) definisce il museo come una membrana che filtra elementi della realtà esterna per poi rilasciarne degli stimoli: le superfici vitree del museo lasciano trapelare la strada al suo esterno, mentre i passanti intravedono le mostre temporanee dalle vetrature del museo, in un continuo gioco di specchi. Vedo un completamento della descrizione di Tinius nell'analisi di Paul Basu (2017). Ispirato dal rizoma deleziano, Basu descrive l'inframezzo delle cose materiali (*the inbetweeness*) come uno stato liminale in continuo divenire, ibrido, ambiguo, che connette molteplicità apparentemente contraddittorie tra loro, come, appunto, il mondo là fuori e il museo. *L'inbetweeness* di Basu può essere concepita come un attrito tra membrane diverse – delle persone e delle cose, da una parte, dei musei e del mondo esterno, dall'altra. Tale attrito è di per sé cangiante, circoscrivibile al contesto – dove è ubicato il museo, per esempio – e/o alla singola interazione sensuale tra un dato soggetto e quel manufatto e, in quanto tale, non riproducibile in modo identico. L'attrito tra membrane è trasformativo in quanto suggerisce un processo in divenire, uno scambio di stimoli, di filtraggi e selezioni dinamiche tra persone, cose, luoghi.

Sulla base di questi stimoli, l'articolo propone la metafora della membrana come strumento etnografico per analizzare la complessità dei legami tra persone e residui sacrali. Secondo *l'etnografia della membrana*, ovvero un'etnografia in cui il campo è analizzato attraverso la metafora della membrana, i rapporti tra umani e materia si articolano all'interno di molteplici membrane comunicanti: è membrana non soltanto il museo, ma anche il singolo manufatto e il singolo visitatore. Mettendo ulteriormente a fuoco, si individuano altre membrane: quelle del soggetto con la sua comunità locale, a sua volta ripartita nelle membrane del bagaglio esperienziale-culturale di quest'ultima e in quelle dei suoi rapporti di forza, estesi a un intero gruppo sociale o a singoli individui, e così via. Le interazioni tra persone e residui sacrali assumono sfumature diverse a seconda dello scambio specifico che intercorre tra le membrane coinvolte, influenzato dallo spazio occupato dalle membrane,

così come dal tipo di filtro posto da ciascuna membrana nei confronti delle altre con le quali è interrelata. Si pensi, ad esempio, alla selezione, di volta in volta diversa, che un singolo individuo fa rispetto al codice esperienziale-culturale della sua comunità.

L'etnografia della membrana, quindi, analizza le dinamiche d'interazione tra membrane, spazialmente, temporalmente e, se vogliamo, anche esistenzialmente situate, considerandone tutti i micro-meccanismi intersoggettivi implicati e che riguardano la regolazione tra interno ed esterno. Dal momento che la forza resiliente e dirompente del residuo sacrale dipende proprio dal tipo di memoria incorporata e d'immaginazione che i singoli soggetti hanno della sacralità e religiosità che il residuo sacrale rimanda loro, la metafora della membrana e i diversi attriti tra membrane permettono di spiegare più nel dettaglio l'estrema variabilità del modo in cui può agire il residuo sacrale in un museo. La mia ricerca a Taiwan, che ha avuto luogo in momenti diversi tra il 2017 e il 2020, si è avvalsa, appunto, di una metodologia in linea con un'etnografia della membrana, attraverso cui ho potuto riflettere sulle diverse modalità di gestione o riproduzione del residuo sacrale sia da parte dei curatori museali, sia da parte dei visitatori taiwanesi.

Materia sacra a Taiwan

La ricerca ha trattato sia musei nei quali viene esposta materia sacra, sia musei fondati e gestiti da gruppi buddhisti presenti nell'isola, così come gli spazi espositivi all'interno dei templi, rientrando così nella definizione dei cosiddetti musei religiosi (Orzech 2020). La peculiarità di questi musei religiosi è anche data dal fatto che le loro comunità di afferenza difficilmente li considerano come musei, ovvero come dispositivi culturali aperti a un pubblico più ampio, ma piuttosto li definiscono come luoghi della memoria comunitaria. In alternativa, le comunità religiose utilizzano il termine museo solo o prevalentemente all'interno di una cornice internazionale, ipotizzando lo spazio museale come un luogo d'incontro con una massa internazionale di visitatori, per poi essere fruito, invece, come spazio rituale da parte della propria comunità. Una disamina della gestione del residuo sacrale da parte di questi musei, di conseguenza, non potrà non prescindere dal loro specifico contesto etnografico.

Secondo l'etnografia della membrana da me adottata, ho considerato, in primo luogo, le pratiche museali osservate sul campo interdipendenti dalla percezione sensoriale che orienta le interazioni, quotidiane e non, con la

materialità di chi fa parte di una data società, ispirandomi così all'approccio ecologico di Appadurai e Breckenridge (1992). Sia i musei fondati dai gruppi buddhisti, sia gli spazi espositivi all'interno dei templi, infatti, si inseriscono in una storia consolidata di conservazione e memorializzazione precedente all'introduzione del museo come istituzione culturale nella società cinese (Wang, Rowlands 2017).

Nel caso cinese, sia in ambito pubblico che privato, il possesso di manufatti materiali costituiva un segno distintivo di potere, status sociale e di lignaggio (come le tavolette votive degli antenati e la genealogia familiare), così come di accrescimento intellettuale, morale ed estetico. Conservare beni materiali, comporli in un sistema espositivo, fruibile o meno dal singolo possessore e/o dalla sua cerchia di conoscenze, e goderne a livello estetico con la contemplazione era, fin dalla dinastia Song (960-1279), considerata una pratica spirituale di meditazione e riflessione che avvicinava l'esteta a una perfezione etico-morale (Wang, Rowlands 2017). Queste pratiche estetico-conservative possono spiegare in che termini, per esempio, la visione di statue del Buddha da parte dei visitatori taiwanesi possa rappresentare una crasi tra esperienza spirituale ed esperienza estetica, senza che le due entrino in conflitto tra loro e nutrendosi a vicenda di significato. In questo senso, il collezionismo di beni materiali, nella storia cinese, si basava su meccanismi diversi rispetto a quelli europei, dove il possesso di beni collezionati aveva la funzione di avere un controllo, anche conoscitivo, sul mondo (Clifford 1988: 218-220). Il collezionismo cinese aveva, infatti, la funzione sia di un'elevazione spirituale e morale del singolo, sia di una continuità culturale-religiosa all'interno dei membri di una ristretta comunità.

Ad esempio, il tempio della religione popolare cinese – un'interazione tra confucianesimo, taoismo e buddhismo – in quanto fondato da un gruppo di lignaggi condividenti il culto di una divinità che proteggeva il territorio nel quale vivevano, conservava la memoria storica di fondazione del legame tra lignaggi, così come degli eventi che hanno interessato il suo territorio e per i quali interveniva la divinità. La conservazione e la trasmissione della memoria comunitaria avvenivano sia grazie alle iscrizioni sulle pareti, i registri del tempio e i momenti aggregativi tra generazioni diverse, sia grazie alla collezione di elementi architettonici o votivi del tempio sottratti agli incendi o selezionati dalle ricostruzioni o ampliamenti periodici del tempio per il loro valore collettivo e memoriale e a prescindere dal loro potere sacrale.

In secondo luogo, ho cercato di analizzare le micro-dinamiche tra singoli soggetti e materia sacra esposta. A tale scopo, ho affiancato agli strumenti etnografici tradizionali, ovvero osservazione partecipante e interviste etnografiche, la metodologia del “walking fieldwork” (Gröschel 2015). Una volta stabiliti legami più profondi con alcuni credenti che frequentavano i templi oggetto della mia ricerca, ho richiesto loro di visitare insieme un museo religioso e di riflettere su quello che stavano vedendo e sperimentando a livello corporeo durante la visita, contestualizzando così, nel modo più situato possibile, l’interazione del singolo visitatore con la materialità esposta e il suo residuo sacrale. Partiamo ora dal sostrato culturale e religioso che informa le pratiche di manipolazione e gestione del residuo sacrale a Taiwan.

Esporre il residuo sacrale a Taiwan: il ling

Sia il Buddhismo cinese, sia la religione popolare cinese hanno elaborato una complessa concettualizzazione della materialità come mediatrice delle relazioni tra gli esseri umani e le forze ultraterrene. La presenza di un supporto materiale che incorpora la divinità raffigurata è fondamentale per focalizzare l’azione rituale del credente, facendolo interagire con la sacralità in modo tangibile. Come direbbe Meyer (2010), la statuaria religiosa cinese permette di creare un “sensescape” necessario per disciplinare i corpi e renderli parte di un’esperienza religiosa condivisa. A tale scopo, la materia – in questo caso, legno di canfora – viene plasmata in una serie di passaggi rituali volti a ospitare lo spirito (*ling*, 靈) della divinità.

Il complesso assemblaggio dato dal legno – all’interno del quale è stata ricavata una cavità – insieme a semi, fili colorati, metalli e, talvolta, insetti vivi o brani di sutra, sangue di gallo, rende la materia un corpo vivo: i suoi organi interni, rappresentati dai materiali elencati prima, sono posti nella cavità del legno e il sangue di gallo, asperso con un pennello sulla superficie esterna della statua, li vivifica e pone in relazione tra loro esattamente come il sangue nelle vene di un essere vivente. Solo allora il *ling* della divinità prende possesso della scultura².

Il *ling*, ovvero potere sacrale, ma anche spirito, è presente in gradienti diversi in ogni essere vivente e non vivente – come pietre – secondo un’equa

2. Non ho potuto osservare dal vivo una cerimonia di consacrazione delle statue religiose (cfr. Lin 2015), ma ho intervistato sia officianti daoisti, sia scultori di statuaria, i quali mi hanno esposto il loro punto di vista sulla consacrazione e desacralizzazione delle statue.

distribuzione di campi di forza in equilibrio tra loro³. All'interno di questa circolazione incessante di *ling*, la morte degli esseri umani rappresenta uno spartiacque tra tre tipologie diverse di *ling*: il *ling* degli antenati, il *ling* delle divinità e quello dei fantasmi. Il discrimine tra le tre è dato dalla presenza o meno di un nucleo di discendenza che possa prendersi cura della transizione dell'anima del defunto verso la vita ultraterrena attraverso riti ciclici, consistenti in offerte di cibo, fiori e, soprattutto, incenso, considerato lo strumento principale di comunicazione – l'odore dell'incenso richiamerebbe la presenza del *ling* della divinità, fantasma o antenato (Halbkirk e Chang 2017). Nel caso di quest'ultimo, il fatto di avere una discendenza fa sì che le sue interazioni siano limitate ai soli membri della sua famiglia mentre⁴, nel caso delle divinità, si tratta di personaggi storici che non avevano una discendenza, ma hanno ricoperto una fondamentale funzione sociale o politica per la comunità nella quale vivevano. In questo caso, il loro *ling* può intervenire al di là dei lignaggi familiari e proteggere un'estesa comunità di fedeli, sia essa rappresentata da una località circoscritta, o da un legame d'elezione, carismatico, che si instaura anche in un'area molto più estesa geograficamente.

Il caso dei fantasmi può spiegare in modo esplicito le conseguenze date dalla disfunzionalità dei riti quotidiani per alimentare il *ling* delle divinità. I fantasmi, come le divinità, non hanno una discendenza che si prenda cura di loro e, a loro differenza, non hanno compiuto in vita gesta tali da rendersi socialmente e politicamente utili per la comunità nella quale risiedevano. Si tratta di uomini e donne solitamente soggetti a morte violenta e senza la possibilità di costruirsi un proprio nucleo familiare – ad esempio, bambini, ragazze in età da marito o giovani soldati scapoli. In quanto privati della possibilità di guadagnare la via dell'aldilà, i fantasmi transitano perennemente nella vita terrena alla ricerca di un riscatto, interferendo e creando danni agli umani.

Non è un caso che il loro rovinoso errare non preveda una materialità nella quale trovare un supporto, ma, piuttosto, momenti episodici nei quali qualsiasi supporto materiale (oggetti, corpi umani, statue abbandonate) diventa una cassa di risonanza per la loro vendetta. Di conseguenza, la statuaria religiosa, se non correttamente curata attraverso i rituali, può divenire un ricettacolo per i fantasmi: la divinità, non sentendosi apprezzata dai fedeli, abbandona

3. Cfr. Sangren 1987, Chang 1993, Lin 2015 per un primo approfondimento sul dibattito relativo ai diversi significati del *ling*.

4. A differenza delle divinità, gli antenati non hanno una statuaria, ma il loro culto si basa sulle tavolette in legno; cfr. Sangren 1987 e Lin 2015.

il suo corpo di legno per dirigersi verso altri lidi. È interessante notare come, sia nel caso degli antenati che in quello delle divinità, la trascuratezza rituale possa irritare entrambe le tipologie di *ling*, le quali poi verranno ad assumere una temporanea natura di fantasmi: come quest'ultimi, anche le prime cercheranno vendetta, e la loro materialità diventa potenzialmente pericolosa, "tossica".

In questo meccanismo omeostatico mantenuto dal reciproco scambio tra esseri umani e forze ultraterrene – offerte in cambio di protezione – è previsto un delicato processo di regolazione della materia sacra: una volta che quest'ultima viene danneggiata (cade a terra per incuria, subisce danni a causa di catastrofi naturali, ecc.), trascurata o consapevolmente abbandonata (si vuole cessare il rapporto con una data divinità, il cui potere protettivo non è più considerato efficace), ecco che si deve disinnescare il *ling* della stessa attraverso un rituale di desacralizzazione che, letteralmente, richiama il *ling* fuori dalla statua (*tui sheng*, 褪神).

Il processo di musealizzazione, come più volte ribadito nel corso delle interviste, rappresenta uno dei fattori di "minaccia" della materia sacra: il fatto di esporre la statuaria sacra senza potersene prendere cura da un punto di vista rituale è, per antonomasia, un meccanismo di offesa nei confronti della divinità, e di minaccia per chi vi entra in contatto, a meno che quest'ultima non venga liberata con il *tui sheng*. La pericolosità dei manufatti religiosi musealizzati è emersa chiaramente in due contesti etnografici.

Il primo esempio è rappresentato dallo spazio espositivo del tempio Ciyong a Xinzhuang. Quest'ultimo fu costruito nel 2013, all'ultimo piano del quartiere amministrativo del tempio, allo scopo di proteggere dai furti la statuaria più antica ed elementi architettonici risultati dai periodici rinnovamenti del tempio. Infatti, nel 1999 una banda organizzata aveva rubato 24 statuette votive, le quali sarebbero state restituite al tempio solo nel 2009, quando un collezionista realizzò di essere in possesso di quella che il tempio reclamava come refurtiva leggendo un articolo di giornale fatto pubblicare dall'amministrazione del tempio. L'intera statuaria fu soggetta al rituale del *tuisheng* e il *ling* delle divinità trasferito in statue di recente fabbricazione per continuare a essere oggetto di culto. Quando interpellai un membro del comitato amministrativo del tempio incaricato di gestire lo spazio espositivo, spiegò che la cerimonia del *tuisheng* era necessaria per rispettare le divinità, dal momento che uno spazio espositivo non era un tempio, né aveva lo scopo di diventarlo. Il *tuisheng*, quindi, permette di preservare l'aspetto storico-artistico della sta-

tuaria del tempio consentendo, allo stesso tempo, il regolare funzionamento della ritualità di quest'ultimo.

Il secondo esempio è fornito dal Tudigong Culture Museum, un museo stabilito nel 2017 a Taoyuan. La zona, soggetta a riqualificazione urbana, presentava un tempo numerosi templi dedicati al dio Tudigong, divinità deputata alla protezione della terra e dei campi, lungo il fiume. La riqualificazione urbana comportò la demolizione dei templi e, quindi, la duplice necessità di ricordarli come parte della memoria storica della zona e di tenere a bada le possibili ire di Tudigong, dissociato da quella località e dai suoi fedeli⁵. Il museo prevede l'esposizione di statuaria di Tudigong, proveniente da altari di famiglia, da piccoli templi a conduzione familiare o privata. Un giorno, un visitatore percepì una sensazione negativa percorrendo l'ala del museo legata alla statuaria e richiese un *tuisheng*, in quanto vi era sicuramente un *ling* intrappolato in qualche statua. Il museo, infatti, fino ad allora non aveva verificato se le statue fossero state desacralizzate da chi le donava. Non era nemmeno escluso che la presenza negativa avvertita dal visitatore fosse da attribuire allo spirito di qualche insetto utilizzato per vivificare la cavità delle statue. Non è, infatti, inusuale chiedersi se determinati accadimenti spiacevoli siano da attribuire alla presenza di fantasmi che hanno preso possesso delle statue religiose, come si può evincere dalla disamina dei mass media taiwanesi⁶. Dopo la cerimonia, il museo non registrò più episodi negativi.

La percezione della statuaria musealizzata come *ling* da liberare non trova, tuttavia, parere unanime. Alcuni membri del comitato del tempio Dizhang An a Xinzhuang, per esempio, hanno dichiarato, sia nel primo sopralluogo del 2017, sia nei successivi del 2019 e 2020, che non sia necessario effettuare la cerimonia di desacralizzazione o *tuisheng*, in quanto il *ling* abbandona direttamente la statua se non più utilizzata all'interno del tempio. Al contempo, materiale museale fabbricato in occasione di mostre temporanee e già desacralizzato – in quanto realizzato con materiali non tradizionali o non sottoposto a un rituale di consacrazione – può comunque suscitare reazioni spirituali osservabili nei templi ed essere, quindi, vissuto come sacro. Un esempio è rappresentato dal museo di antropologia dell'Accademia Sinica.

5. Intervista al direttore del museo, 5 giugno 2020.

6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjpiS-3ZLG4>, il titolo del servizio giornalistico (落難神像是鬼不是神?, *luonan shenxiang shi gui bushi shen?*, “Gli dei abbandonati sono fantasmi o dei?”) allude al fatto che le statue abbandonate dai fedeli possano contenere o meno dei fantasmi o delle divinità.

Il museo, nel 2017, aveva ospitato la mostra permanente (che viene periodicamente aggiornata dopo un certo numero di anni) sulle diverse pratiche religiose presenti a Taiwan, sia quelle tradizionali, ovvero il buddhismo, la religione popolare cinese e il daoismo, sia quelle emerse nel corso degli anni, come Yiguan Dao. Visti anche gli interessi di ricerca degli accademici della Sinica che hanno curato la mostra, in particolare l'attuale direttrice dell'istituto di etnologia, Chang Hsun, relativi alla cultura materiale religiosa, l'intento era quello di evocare lo spazio rituale del daoismo e della religione popolare cinese. Dato il ruolo centrale assunto dai bastoncini d'incenso come canale comunicativo tra il credente e la divinità, la mostra presentava l'allestimento di tre incensi elettrici, posti all'entrata dell'altare, allo scopo di rappresentare, sotto forma di simulacro stilizzato, cosa avviene all'interno di un tempio e, al contempo, permettere un'attivazione sensoriale e del ricordo in quanti praticano questa religione. Di qui, l'ingiunzione della targa: "Three different incense fragrances are provided here. Press and hold each button for a while to smell the fragrances. Has it evoked some of your experiences with Han folk belief?"⁷.

L'utilizzo dell'incenso elettrico era stato scelto proprio perché considerato più astratto e meno esplicito rispetto alla situazione rituale, oltre che rispondere ai parametri conservativi e di sicurezza del museo. Chang Hsun aveva visitato il museo dell'incenso, aperto nel sud dell'isola nel 2016, così come diversi negozi d'incenso proprio allo scopo di individuare un possibile utilizzo dell'incenso elettrico sia da un punto di vista culturale che museale, rispondendo alle esigenze di filologicità, astrattezza e scientificità del museo. Tuttavia, Chang Hsun non si sarebbe mai aspettata che la mostra potesse innescare dei comportamenti rituali in alcuni visitatori:

When they see incense they bow/pray, they cannot separate the museum from the religious space. That was a shock for us: are we making something real? [...] Some visitors asked me where they can buy electric incense. We put a sign "These are not real religious objects, they are desacralized"⁸

Come si evince da questa sintesi della ricerca sul campo, non tutti gli attori "locali" incontrati percepiscono le sale di un museo nel quale sono esposte statue che non hanno attraversato la cerimonia del *tui sheng* come pericolose. Per quanto gli attori in gioco percepiscano la potenziale pericolosità del residuo sacrale prodotto dalle pratiche di conservazione ed esposizione delle

7. Trascrizione dalle note di campo, novembre 2017.

8. Trascrizione della conversazione con Hsun Chang dalle note di campo, novembre 2017.

statue al di fuori dello spazio rituale ma funzionali alla memorializzazione del tempio, il significato da loro attribuito allo stesso residuo sacrale e le misure volte a rendere l'esposizione maggiormente rispettosa nei confronti delle divinità, disinnescandone la pericolosità, non sono omogenee tra loro. Come si è visto nell'esempio del Tudigong Culture Museum, si è trattato di un singolo individuo e della sua specifica relazione con il materiale esposto che ha sollevato il problema del residuo sacrale che percepiva.

Si hanno, quindi, varie interazioni tra membrane: la membrana rituale, che orienta le membrane dei singoli e della collettività del tempio verso pratiche di interazione con e protezione della e dalla materialità, la membrana delle divinità, che possono decidere fino a che punto l'interazione che i credenti stabiliscono con loro sia soddisfacente per restare all'interno delle statue, ma anche la membrana dei singoli o di un gruppo specifico di persone che rimodula gli stimoli sia della membrana rituale che quella delle divinità, selezionando modalità percettive e pratiche conservative specifiche. Sarà quindi necessario spostare il focus dell'argomentazione su un piano più microscopico, analizzando le interazioni tra visitatori e materia sacra dietro le vetrine per completare la nostra etnografia della membrana.

Micro-interazioni tra residui sacrali e visitatori

Le interazioni tra persone e materia sacra in esposizione che ho avuto modo di analizzare tramite l'osservazione partecipante e il *walking fieldwork* hanno riguardato soprattutto due musei fondati da due lignaggi buddhisti, il Museum of World Religions, stabilito nel distretto di Yonghe dal gruppo Ling Jiou Shan, di cui Dharma Master Hsin Tao (1948-) è a capo, e il Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum a Kaohsiung⁹, fondato da uno dei gruppi buddhisti più importanti di Taiwan, Fo Guang Shan, il cui leader spirituale era Master Hsing Yun (1927-2023), a sua volta maestro di Hsin Tao. Questi due musei sono i più noti nella letteratura specialistica, ma rappresentano un fenomeno molto più esteso e che riguarda l'intero buddhismo taiwanese. Quest'ultimo, fin dai suoi albori con la migrazione di monaci buddhisti dalla Cina maoista, ha utilizzato mezzi educativi e di comunicazione, come il museo, per diffondere il programma spirituale-morale dei monaci e ottenere cambiamenti sociali, anziché perseguire l'isolamento spirituale¹⁰. I due musei, proprio in quanto rappresentano un incontro tra le

9. In questo caso, la ricerca etnografica è stata condotta sia da me, nel 2017, sia insieme a Shu-Li Wang (Wang, Gamberi 2023), tra il 2019 e il 2020.

10. Cfr. Madsen 2007, McDaniel 2017.

concettualizzazioni della materia sacra di uno specifico gruppo religioso e quelle del singolo visitatore, riflettenti a loro volta quelle del suo gruppo religioso o sostrato culturale di riferimento, chiariscono ulteriormente le complesse dinamiche in gioco tra la membrana esterna e quella interna dei musei.

Innanzitutto, è interessante notare la posizionalità dei due musei rispetto ai centri monastici dei due gruppi, una caratteristica che spiega la possibile compenetrazione tra spazio rituale e spazio museale e, quindi, le modalità curatoriali di esposizione e interazione con la materialità che predispongono già il visitatore verso un'interazione specifica con il residuo sacrale. Mentre il Museum of World Religions è situato all'interno di un centro commerciale di Yonghe, distante quindi dal monastero di Ling Jiou Shan, il Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum è ai piedi della collina dove è ubicato il monastero di Fo Guang Shan.

Non a caso, quindi, il Buddha Museum emula esplicitamente lo spazio rituale, confondendosi con esso. Il Buddha Museum nacque inizialmente come un memoriale buddhista, ovvero un monumento preposto a contenere la reliquia di Śakyamuni Buddha, in questo caso un dente donato come parte delle relazioni diplomatiche di Hsing Yun con il lama tibetano Kunga Dorje Rinpoche¹¹. La sua struttura, che unisce un sistema di gallerie d'arte contemporanea a soggetto religioso o riguardanti una più generica "cultura cinese" a tre altari funzionanti con un livello crescente di sacralità, rivela una consapevole ambiguità tra il sacrale e il museale. Se nell'altare con la reliquia non è consentito fotografare ed è obbligatorio mantenere il silenzio, negli altri due altari si alternano la preghiera del singolo con la dimostrazione ai visitatori di come interagire ritualmente con la statuaria da parte di monache e giovani volontarie¹². Queste ultime illustrano anche il significato delle iconografie per poi raccontare la loro esperienza religiosa e il legame con Fo Guang Shan. La dimostrazione rituale è sia una narrazione museale improntata a un'interazione corporea-esperienziale tra i visitatori, sia una pratica effettivamente percepita come culto dai visitatori buddhisti, seguaci o meno di Fo Guang Shan, pur sotto lo sguardo e le indicazioni delle guide o delle monache, elemento che si discosta dall'esperienza religiosa nei templi.

Questa stimolazione religiosa-spirituale raggiunge un'intensità talmente alta che persino raffigurazioni in plastica del Buddha al di fuori dei tre altari

11. A seguito della denominazione in inglese di "Buddha Museum", il termine cinese per indicare il museo ha mantenuto la denominazione di memoriale (Fóguāngshān Fótuó jìniànguǎn 佛光山佛陀紀念館, Buddha Memorial Center),

12. Si rimanda, in particolare, a Shih 2017.

fanno scaturire comportamenti rituali tra i visitatori. Alcuni di loro mi hanno riferito di considerare il monumento a tutti gli effetti come un museo ma che permette, al contempo, una trasformazione spirituale analoga al pellegrinaggio, al punto che si sono recati più di una volta al museo come segno di buon auspicio e per ritrovare una serenità spirituale. Si può quindi dire che l'atteggiamento dei visitatori sia "oscillatorio", senza una predominanza dell'aspetto rituale su quello museale-contemplativo. Lo spazio è fruito sia dai seguaci di Fo Guang Shan come un servizio sociale alla comunità, per ritrovarsi tra confratelli e venerare la reliquia, sia da chi non è seguace e si trova a visitare gli stessi spazi.

Il distacco spaziale del Museum of World Religions dal monastero di Ling Jiou Shan si riflette, invece, in una museografia di stampo "classico", per quanto connessa alla teologia di Hsin Tao e con un apparato simbolico molto denso. Il museo, infatti, espone con sguardo comparativo i manufatti di religioni diverse, oltre a quella buddhista, secondo una narrativa che risponde all'approccio "analitico" e "intellettuale" di Hsin Tao alle religioni¹³: accostando manufatti di religioni diverse tra loro si intende dimostrare come queste ultime siano sistemi di regolazione morale delle società e di eventi universali come la vita e la morte.

Il museo è anche caratterizzato da un'interazione intersoggettiva con le guide, volontari reclutati dal museo tramite concorso e successiva formazione. Le guide hanno il compito di rendere il complesso impianto simbolico del museo intellegibile ai visitatori. Da un lato, le guide forniscono informazioni orientative su ciascuna religione; dall'altro, esemplificano il messaggio del museo attraverso la propria esperienza personale e stimolando un dibattito riflessivo con i visitatori, decostruendone gli assunti sulle religioni. Il fatto che si stabilisca un contatto emotivo con la guida, la quale a sua volta è a disposizione di tutti e costantemente presente nello spazio espositivo, rende la dimensione intersoggettiva dell'interazione con la materialità esposta particolarmente importante. L'unico spazio nel quale è richiesto un coinvolgimento sensoriale effettivo è rappresentato da una pedana di meditazione, nella quale indugiare per sperimentare le varie pratiche di meditazione e preghiera delle religioni rappresentate.

Vista la presenza minimale dell'esperienza sensoriale nel World Religions Museum, le interazioni religiose sono meno evidenti e circoscritte ad alcune aree del museo. Ho notato micro-comportamenti religiosi, come unire i palmi delle mani in segno di rispetto dei bodhisattva e dei buddha esposti, che

13. Cfr. Wilke, Guggenmos 2003.

si alternavano agli atteggiamenti estetico-contemplativi propri delle visite museali. Accanto a queste micro-reazioni spirituali, si può osservare come il museo venga fruito diversamente dai seguaci di Ling Jiou Shan, i quali decodificano segni che per gli altri visitatori restano sotto traccia.

Un giorno, mi sono imbattuta in una comitiva di seguaci di Ling Jiou Shan venuti appositamente per omaggiare alcune aree del museo, in particolare lo spazio meditativo e l'uscita del museo, caratterizzata da uno schermo digitale con il segno della mudra. La prima area sarebbe stata indicata da Hsing Tao come esempio dell'attività meditativa e d'illuminazione che ogni credente dovrebbe sperimentare, iscrivendo quindi lo spazio meditativo, usualmente ignorato dal resto dei visitatori, all'interno delle pratiche religiose comunitarie di Ling Jiou Shan. Lo schermo luminoso, che solitamente sfugge all'attenzione del visitatore medio, ha invece la funzione, per i seguaci di Ling Jiou Shan, di distribuire la benedizione e la forza carismatica di Hsin Tao ai suoi fedeli, i quali la percepiscono a livello fisico come una scarica elettrica, come è stato riferito.

Si può quindi osservare come l'ambiguità tra il sacrale e il museale sia presente in entrambi i musei, per quanto in gradazioni e modalità diverse. Tale ambiguità è, a sua volta, alimentata dalle considerazioni dei rappresentanti spirituali o amministrativi dei due gruppi religiosi. In entrambi i casi, si è evidenziato che sta al visitatore stabilire se i due musei siano o meno luoghi spirituali. Per i monaci il museo resta uno spazio precipuamente educativo e preoccuparsi della veridicità o meno del potere sacrale dei manufatti esposti diviene secondario. Ad esempio, una monaca che lavora al Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum ha dichiarato che non è importante sapere se la statuaria del museo sia consacrata, in quanto la trasformazione spirituale più rilevante deve avvenire all'interno del cuore del credente, nella sua vita quotidiana, con o senza l'aiuto della reliquia.

Tuttavia, il mio *walking fieldwork* con alcuni credenti buddhisti ha mostrato le contraddizioni delle dichiarazioni della monaca e di altri curatori coinvolti nei due musei. Riporto il *walking fieldwork* fatto al Museum of World Religions con una seguace di Fo Guang Shan, che chiamerò Irene. Irene, una donna di circa quarant'anni, divenne seguace di Fo Guang Shan a seguito di una visita al Buddha Museum, nella quale il potere sacrale della reliquia l'avrebbe protetta da un incidente stradale avvenuto subito dopo la visita al museo. La sua esperienza religiosa è quindi strettamente intrecciata a quella museale. Nel corso della sua visita, comparò più volte quest'ultima all'esperienza al Buddha Museum. All'inizio della visita, dichiarò che aveva avvertito una forte scarica

di energia, come una corrente che attraversava il suo corpo, in maniera simile a quando partecipava al rituale del tempio Fo Guang Shan a Xinzhuang. La scarsa illuminazione del museo, unita alla selezione dei manufatti religiosi buddhisti, le comunicavano tuttavia un'atmosfera tetra che lei vedeva in contraddizione con la luce e la serenità del buddhismo da lei sperimentato a Xinzhuang. Per dimostrare quanto stava dicendo, prese in mano il cellulare e mi mostrò foto del tempio a Xinzhuang. Prima di uscire dal museo, provò la pedana di meditazione, continuando a enfatizzare le differenze con Fo Guang Shan, dove la meditazione è guidata da un monaco e in silenzio, senza delle installazioni video come in quella sala. Nel *walking fieldwork* con Irene vi furono quindi momenti in cui la forza del residuo sacrale prendeva il sopravvento su quella che, per il resto del tempo, è stata una normale visita a un museo.

Altro aspetto da evidenziare è che Irene riprodusse in parte la sua esperienza spirituale al Buddha Museum, avendo delle aspettative specifiche, quello che Steph Berns (2017), come già accennato, definisce come “spiritual baggage”. Nel corso del *walking fieldwork*, tutti i partecipanti arrivavano già al museo con dei preconcetti legati a Ling Jiou Shan¹⁴, enfatizzando, per esempio, la selezione dei manufatti buddhisti in mostra come inusuali rispetto al buddhismo cinese e più in linea con la sensibilità di Hsin Tao, influenzato dal buddhismo tibetano e dal tantrismo e, quindi, giudicato negativamente in quanto eterodosso. La logica della membrana mostra, perciò, come siano presenti, e variabili a seconda dei contesti, meccanismi di selezione e filtraggio della percezione del residuo sacrale negli spazi espositivi, tali per cui lo spettro di reazione dei visitatori nei confronti di quest'ultimi è estremamente cangiante.

Conclusioni

L'etnografia della membrana incentrata sulle micro-relazioni intersoggettive incontrate (l'epidermide dei visitatori e dei curatori, le superfici lignee della statuaria religiosa cinese, le pareti dei musei o degli spazi espositivi nei templi) ha messo in evidenza due aspetti. Il primo è che le comunità locali desacralizzano esse stesse i loro manufatti rituali per scopi memorialistici. La desacralizzazione e, quindi, il prodursi del residuo sacrale non sono associabili unicamente ai musei europei, ma sono pratiche trasversali alla musealizzazione più largamente intesa. Nel caso delle comunità, la desacralizzazione è il frutto di una scelta agentiva, spesso attuata attraverso una pratica rituale volta ad annullare il potere sacrale, da una parte, e, dall'altra, il legame

14. Otto persone.

profondo che si viene a instaurare tra una statua e il credente all'interno del tempio. Le comunità, inoltre, non sono delle entità monolitiche, ma presentano al loro interno differenze sensibili nel trattare e percepire il residuo sacrale e la sua problematicità. Tali differenze sono spiegabili attraverso le specifiche circostanze che intervengono a livello micro-relazionale tra singoli soggetti o piccoli gruppi facenti capo a un dato tempio o museo religioso.

Proprio in virtù di queste micro-relazioni con il residuo sacrale, e qui si perviene al secondo aspetto osservabile attraverso l'etnografia, i visitatori professanti la religione di "provenienza" dei manufatti reagiscono in modo molteplice alle esposizioni museali. Vi sono visitatori, come nell'episodio del museo di etnologia dell'Accademia Sinica, che considerano i manufatti religiosi esposti unicamente come reperti museali; altri che, invece, hanno reazioni culturali anche verso quei manufatti o architetture create per l'occasione dell'esibizione e che non sono mai state sacralizzate né parte di un rito. Altri visitatori alternano momenti in cui avvertono il residuo sacrale, a momenti in cui vedono soltanto manufatti museali. Di questi, alcuni percepiscono il residuo sacrale come una forza pronta per vendicarsi senza controllo, altri semplicemente come una presenza che convive indisturbata con l'allestimento museale.

Gli stessi manufatti museali riuniscono tutte queste caratteristiche: materia espositiva, residuo sacrale vendicativo o che convive placidamente con il museo, riproduzione artificiosa del residuo sacrale in un contesto di museo religioso. I manufatti museali, quindi, sono liminali (Dudley 2017): i loro residui sacrali mettono in comunicazione, attraverso un sistema di membrane, il museo e il "contesto d'origine", attivando potenzialità diverse a seconda di chi entra in contatto con loro.

Vi è, quindi, un'estrema trasversalità e variabilità dell'intreccio tra secolare e sacro all'interno dei musei, che siano o meno parte di una pratica museale eurocentrica solitamente considerata come "secolare". Ricerche di museologia comparativa (Kreps 2003) come questa pongono a critica tutte quelle ricostruzioni dei templi e degli spazi sacri (Clark 2016; Martin 2017) in cui l'"Altro", in questo caso il credente religioso asiatico, viene appiattito in una dimensione storica e apolitica simile a quella della museologia coloniale (Clark 2016; Martin 2017), rimandando, invece, a un rapporto altrettanto complesso rispetto al "nostro" con il residuo sacrale.

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Residui sacrali nei musei. Un'etnografia della membrana nel patrimonio religioso di Taiwan.

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More seats at “The Philosopher’s Table”

The reinvigoration of a multicultural community association in southern Italy during and post-pandemic

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ABSTRACT: How voluntary associations promote social interaction across difference and contribute to building diverse communities are questions of relevance in Italy and beyond. To be successful, associations must earn and maintain reputations as groups worth joining. To do so can be challenging, given that they bring together people with different life experiences and languages. To thrive, groups must remain flexible and adaptive. This article addresses an under-considered type of voluntary association that contributes to building relationships and shared sense of community across cultural boundaries: the multicultural social club. The report is based upon early findings from an on-going ethnographic study in Puglia concerning the aspirations, activities, and life-cycles of multicultural clubs. It describes how members of one organization – The Philosopher’s Table – launched themselves on a path of reflection and reinvigoration during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their objectives were to discover ways better to serve existing members, assist the community, and increase membership. Among the club’s noteworthy characteristics is that it includes locally-born Italians and expatriates in nearly equal number. Expatriates rarely receive attention in discussions of diverse communities in Italy. Findings from this project help address that knowledge gap, contribute to current interest in conviviality in multicultural settings, and extend understandings of the dynamics and life-cycles of social leisure groups that are diverse by design.

KEYWORDS: MULTICULTURAL COMMUNITIES; SOCIAL LEISURE GROUPS; INTEGRATION; EXPATRIATES; COVID-19 PANDEMIC; ITALY



Introduction

A growing body of theory and research has called attention to diverseness in the forms, functions, and practices of third sector or voluntary associations (Harris 1998). Academicians and field practitioners continue to make useful contributions regarding the similarities, differences, challenges, and accomplishments of voluntary groups, from the most bureaucratic and formal to the smallest and least structured. Regarding those similarities, Harris points out that even the most informal groups “generally have a name, a governing body of some kind, articulated goals or purposes, and people who are members” (Harris 1998: 145). Two other frequently noted essential characteristics are that members pursue non-economic goals and membership is self-selected (Bromley, Meyer in Sundblom *et al.* 2020: 10). It is fair to assume that a primary motivation for joining is that the goals and purposes of the association are believed to be in line with the potential member’s interests. Still and regardless of the commitment level to the group’s stated purpose, members expect to obtain some type of personal benefit from being part of the group. Successful associations can create a balance between member-benefit and goal realization. If the group leaders do not foster conditions for this balance to occur, members may simply choose to vote with their feet.¹ To realize their promise and maintain reputations as groups worth joining, clubs must meet members’ needs and expectations over time. Doing so can be especially challenging in groups launched specifically to bring diverse peoples together for social purposes, for example, multicultural clubs. Furthermore, the pool of potential members of these groups may change as incomer demographics shift and the interests of prospective members transform. For multicultural clubs to thrive, their leaders must be able to recalibrate. Not all clubs meet their goals in the same way and not all survive. Precisely how multicultural clubs fashion bridges across difference is of interest to many anthropologists, sociologists, as well as scholars and practitioners in other fields. Learning about their operations and life cycle is useful, in particular, to those whose practice or research interests include convivial experiences in settings characterized by cultural and linguistic diversity. To that end, this note presents preliminary findings regarding a small multicultural club (fewer than a hun-

1. There are, of course, other reasons that informal groups may disband. That is why group leaders must be attentive to the possibility that the informal structure, self-selection in membership, developed personal relationships, and perhaps varied goals of participants may themselves eventually lead to the group’s dissolution. In this regard, see Sundblom *et al.* 2020: 12.

dred active members) called “The Philosopher’s Table.”² The club is based in a mid-sized city in Puglia’s southern reaches, the cultural and geographic zone called Salento. The present discussion is based on on-going research on multicultural clubs in Puglia, Italy. One project goal is to understand better the aspirations, activities, and life cycle of these groups. Another is to determine whether, what, and how these clubs contribute to communities and community-building. Long-term findings will lend insight regarding how these globally mushrooming organizations function as settings for convivial interactions and relationship-building across cultures and languages.

Multicultural clubs and social connectedness

Multicultural clubs can help establish social connectedness across cultural difference and create paths for communities to move forward in new ways. Generally informal and less structured than some other groups, multicultural clubs can offer relaxed opportunities for sociality that may facilitate the successful integration of incomers, for example, immigrants. Members of multicultural clubs in Puglia generally include native Italians and international expatriates. Expatriates are often overlooked in studies of community-building. That they receive short shrift is due perhaps to a tendency to consider them as transient professionals who do not consider themselves part of local communities. Findings from Puglia suggest, to the contrary, that many expatriates relocate for reasons besides temporary employment relocation. Most of the expatriates whom the authors have met in the course of this project, including mostly British, Australians, Northern Europeans, and Americans, have no plans to return permanently to their countries of origin. These incomers are a mixed group in terms of their social class status, country of origin, race or ethnicity. The group includes some retirees but also an increasing number of people seeking new work opportunities. They are artists, plumbers, teachers, beauticians, farmers, and more. The majority are white, however there are also Black British and Black Americans among them. Some self-identify as immigrants, but most embrace the term expatriate.

A handful of expatriates have lived in Salento for decades. The zone has lately acquired a reputation as an affordable, attractive part of Italy in which to live a “slow” life, however. A steady stream of expatriates is now purchasing

2. In keeping with ethical standards in ethnographic writing and practice, the authors have created a pseudonym for the organization under discussion and have not identified the precise location of the city within the Salento where it is based.

property or assuming long-term leases and pursuing residency or citizenship. Nearly all profess a desire to be part of the local community and contribute to its common good. Some describe participation in multicultural clubs as steps toward that goal. As Neal *et al.* have written regarding social leisure groups in multicultural settings, these sites allow for “elective coming together of ethnically diverse others” to do “leisure things” (Neal *et al.* 2019: 69). It is important to recognize that doing leisure things in multicultural clubs can contribute to developing a sense of belonging to place, especially for incomers. Plunkett *et al.* have noted that

[...] places are more than geographic locations, with social interactions and meaning being an integral part in creating places and place meanings [...]. Community implies sharing, and we propose that place attachment finds much of its grounding within communities because of this. In other words, shared experiences and shared meaning of those experiences leads to bonding or attachment with the place in which these experiences occurred (Plunkett *et al.* 2018: 473-474).

To that point, as well, we suggest that multicultural clubs such as The Philosopher’s Table, which existed for many years prior to the current influx of expatriates in Salento, function as convivial spaces to generate interpersonal relationships and sense of belonging to a community.

Much literature on voluntary groups emphasizes large, function-created associations that are geared toward achieving instrumental goals and clearly stated outcomes and supported by paid staff (Smith 1997 in Sundblom *et al.* 2020: 10). Less attention has been directed on the expressive dimensions of membership and the establishment of social relationships as an end in itself as is often the case in smaller groups. More studies are called for regarding expressive, small group organizations, where nurturing social or affective bonds between members are regarded as key activities and essential to the success of the association over time (2020: 13). Here we follow Harris’s call for closer attention to issues of member benefit (Harris 1998: 144). We extend Harris’s interest in member-benefit by proposing that small expressive-oriented multicultural clubs such as The Philosopher’s Table contribute to building community across cultural and linguistic difference in part because cultivating social relationships with people different from oneself is considered a key benefit of membership. Interest in how clubs such as this one contribute to building community in multicultural urban environments is also of relevance to theories of conviviality. Sociologists Amanda Wise and Greg Noble have suggested, for example, that the study of convivial practices offers produc-

tive possibilities for scholars who “grapple with the challenges of intercultural relations in an increasingly globalised world, and the challenges [they pose] for local relations of living together” (Wise, Noble 2016: 423). The authors emphasize the need for new *ethnographic* studies [emphasis in original] that spotlight conviviality’s “performative aspects” and give attention to the situated nature of convivial practices, in time and space, as a means better to understand the different ways that people “inhabit diversity” (2016: 424-427). To that point as well, Alina Rzepnikowski suggests that the convivial turn in urban studies reflects both contemporary concerns about “human modes of togetherness” and scholarly attempts to counterbalance prevailing discourses surrounding immigration and diversity as social problems (Rzepnikowski 2020: 1). She cites friendship, compassion, and sharing as important but understudied facets of the “affective side of social relations” that are part of convivial living in multicultural settings (2020: 19). In the next sections we provide more detail about convivial practices in The Philosopher’s Table, its organizational structure, the findings from a survey relevant to understanding the member-benefits of participation in this multicultural club, and steps that club officers and advisors have taken to increase the club’s visibility and relevance to the community in the post-pandemic period.

The Philosopher’s Table: an overview

Founded in 1991, The Philosopher’s Table is Salento’s most enduring multicultural social leisure group. It comprises Italians (primarily Salentines) and foreigners including non-native English speakers from widely ranging walks of life. Most members are college-graduates or hold post-graduate degrees. It was established by an energetic team of about one half-dozen expatriates and Italians led by a relocated Australian. Most original members were Commonwealth citizens who taught in Salento, and their Italian counterparts from local high schools and universities. The name was inspired by the explorations of an eighteenth-century Irish scholar who was among the first Northern Europeans to make a lengthy visit. He published glowing accounts of the Salentine sub-peninsula’s natural beauty, the artistic and intellectual achievements of the people there, and the hospitality he was offered. Given the club’s interests, it is unsurprising that, from the time it was launched, English has been the Philosopher’s Table’s official language. It is worth pointing out in this regard that some incomers’ ability to participate in local community life can be hampered initially by lack of competency in the Italian language. For many expatriates in

Salento, who are generally either native English speakers or highly competent in English, the ability to express oneself well in Italian is an aspirational goal. In turn, the relatively limited number of Italian residents who comfortably communicate in English have few in-person routine opportunities to exercise their English language skills. Multicultural clubs like The Philosopher's Table thus hold appeal for segments of both incomer and local populations.

Philosopher's Table's meetings are generally organized around a presentation, often taking the form of an autobiographical talk, the occasional English language film, or a guided visit to an interesting site in Salento. Monthly meetings begin before the dinner hour in space offered by educational institutions or churches. Group dinners, which almost unfailingly take place after, are opportunities for members to get to know one another better. Afternoon teas and socials hosted in the past are remembered fondly by long-term members for that reason as well. The club is led by a president (chosen by consensus) who is assisted by a small team of volunteer officers and invited advisors that includes expatriates and Italians (fewer than a half dozen total). Its website includes synopses of many past presentations and activities, historical notes on the organization, book and film reviews, and a photograph gallery. Modest annual dues cover the cost of mementos for guest speakers or miscellaneous expenses including a much anticipated annual holiday party where members and guests sing carols and celebrate the season with sparkling prosecco wine accompanied by candied cakes.

In early 2020, at the outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic and in accordance with public health protocols, the in-person activities of The Philosopher's Table and other social leisure organizations came to an abrupt halt. Restrictions varied over the months that followed but continued for about two years. During much of that time, public buildings and private establishments where groups would normally meet were closed or allowed to open only for extremely limited hours. Public health rules dictated how many unrelated individuals could gather in private homes, take walks outside their immediate neighborhoods, or were allowed to drive outside the city limits.

These restrictions required The Philosopher's Table's leadership team to explore different short-term arrangements. They also provided time to consider longer-term plans for the club. Monthly meetings were moved to an online platform. Not surprisingly, members were appreciative that the meetings continued in any form, but all lamented the loss of the level of social contact provided by the in-person format. Again, not surprisingly, enthusiasm

for zoom meetings diminished over time. The number of regular attendees declined and no new members joined. By mid-2021, hardly more than a dozen people continued to pay dues, although that should not be assumed to mean that non-dues payers no longer considered themselves members. The situation became critical for this membership- and participant-centered organization, which had been largely dependent on its supporters to provide off-balance sheet resources for the group’s use (such as meeting facilities) and to make presentations or invite new members.

Thus, longevity notwithstanding, it became apparent to the club’s leadership that focused attention had to be directed at serving members’ interests and recruitment. While continuing to hold zoom meetings, it decided to take forward-looking steps that could bring new energy to the organization. The president and advisory committee resolved to create and distribute a survey – the first in the club’s decades-long history – to gather members’ input. It would solicit information regarding members’ interests, preferences, and their suggestions for how to enhance the club’s community reach. The information would be used to plan for the resumption of in-person activities when conditions permitted. Another novel step on group leaders’ part was to direct the survey not only at members but also at individuals who had attended a Philosopher’s Table event and subsequently not chosen to join. The next section reports on both this project’s general methodology and the specific methodology of survey construction and distribution.

Project methods

This study utilizes primarily qualitative methods, in particular the classic anthropological technique of participant-observation. In keeping with that methodology, the authors became club members in 2016 and have participated in meetings during site visits totaling thirty-six months to date. Over that time, they have attended more than 30 general membership meetings and dinners. Both have been speakers at meetings. One author was invited to join the advisory committee in August 2020 (the height of the pandemic), and served in that capacity for two years. That author participated alongside other advisory committee members in the design, distribution, and analysis of the membership survey. As customary in ethnographic research, informal interviews and conversations in situ with members was the preferred data-gathering methodology. Regarding how anthropologists use conversation as a part of a methodological repertoire, Dressen and Jansen have referred to “the hard work of small talk”

and argued that it is the “hidden core and as well as the engine of fieldwork” (Dressen, Jansen 2013: 239). To that end, the authors have conversed at length about the club with more than 75 individuals, many of them on multiple occasions. Informal interviews are conducive settings for story-telling about the club to occur, which has been demonstrated to be an important research tool in the study of voluntary groups (Chen 2013; Kim 2022). In keeping with ethnographic ethics, the authors referred regularly to their dual roles as club members and as researchers in their conversations with others in the group.

The Philosopher’s Table’s leadership opted to include both forced choice and open-ended questions in their survey. They decided that it would be in keeping with the club’s character to distribute only an English-language version but to note that respondents could answer in Italian if they preferred (ultimately, few did). Four successive survey drafts were created and discussed within the group. Protecting respondents’ anonymity was a major concern for committee members, and the survey was tested twice online within the committee to insure anonymity before its official distribution in April. It was sent out on the club’s email list, which included past and present members, some people who had attended a Philosopher’s Table event in the previous two years but not joined, and elected and appointed local government officials. The survey was also embedded on the club’s homepage and announced in two WhatsApp chat groups and one Facebook group where both expatriate and Italian residents of Salento participated. An email reminder to complete the survey was sent three weeks later, and reminders were also posted on social media.

The survey was composed of 24 questions divided into three sections. The first section focused on how respondents had learned about the club and their level of participation. The second collected mostly open-ended data on what respondents perceived to be the purpose of the club, how they would describe the group in their own words, and their most and least favorite aspects of the club. That section also offered an opportunity to make suggestions about how the group and its activities could become more attractive and visible. Section three captured data on respondents’ first language, sex, age range, and education. Overall, the survey yielded sufficient information to gauge respondents’ views of the club’s value to themselves and the community. It provided a basis for immediate discussions regarding how best to support the group’s continuation and the extent to which the club reflected current members’ aspirations including regarding its role in the community and in contributing to social-connectedness across cultural difference.

Membership survey findings

Responses to survey questions revealed that The Philosopher’s Table was perceived, above all, as a social space in which to meet diverse people, share ideas across cultures, and take advantage of opportunities to learn from a variety of interesting speakers. That last point was buttressed by responses to the question asking respondents to state their preferences regarding future presentation topics. Those who noted a preference called for “variety” of speakers and activities. Thus it was apparent that most members evaluated the club primarily in terms of how it satisfied their expressive needs for sociability and establishing and maintaining relationships in the larger community.

To this point, *native English speakers’* most frequent responses regarding the club’s purpose referred to the organization as a space to meet people/bring people together or to its role of informing people about/promoting English culture.³ Two respondents specifically described the group’s purpose as bringing together English and Italians/English-speaking Italians. Two mentioned the organization’s role in creating opportunities to speak to or help “the community.” Another noted that there are now many more non-native English speakers in Salento and that [the region] is more cosmopolitan than [it was] 30 or 40 years ago “so the organization should provide more variety.” The most frequent responses by *non-native English speakers* characterized the club as a space to meet people from different national backgrounds/bring people together, a place to share ideas/mutual interests/exchange opinions, a venue to learn about various topics, and as a site to “teach”/ “practice”/ “know more about” English language. Non-native English speakers also mentioned that the club facilitated intercultural and international learning and exchange, multicultural networking, socializing, meeting new people, and having fun.

The motives most frequently mentioned by *native English speakers* for why they participated in the club were that they enjoyed “meeting up” / “keeping up” with people and that the topics on which speakers presented appealed to them. Some wrote that their participation allowed them to “get to meet people I perhaps haven’t seen for a while,” “meet new people,” “get out of the house,” “keep up with acquaintances,” or to “stay close to my roots.” The motives most frequently mentioned by *non-native English speakers* for participation were practicing/improving/speaking English, and the interesting presentations. One wrote that the meetings enabled them “to develop cultural

3. It is unclear whether by English culture respondents were referring to language or ethnicity.

awareness [...and...] to be attentive about another point of view.” On a similar note, another non-native English speaker wrote that the club helped them to “broaden my knowledge of international cultures.” Other motives included cross-cultural networking, meeting “people that I really appreciate,” “meeting important guests,” and making friends.

Respondents generally expressed satisfaction with monthly meetings, although the majority noted that they would also like to see more other types of activities in the mix. Regarding those activities, suggestions included group visits to important cultural sites and other excursions in Salento and its environs, social get-togethers such as group meals not necessarily linked to a presentation, and more films, a book club, and group games.

Most respondents referred to the need for growing the membership rolls with younger recruits. Several cited as a disadvantage the high number of seniors among current members (nearly three quarters are over age 60), but only half offered suggestions on how to do so. Those who did focused primarily on logistics (convenience of meeting location, days of the weeks and time of day), increasing the number of social meet-up opportunities, and some outreach strategies. Regarding how to increase sociality, respondents called for additional informal gatherings, launching a WhatsApp group, holding poetry readings, hosting informal performances by members (for example, acting out scenes from plays), and creating opportunities to sing in English with Italian translations of the songs on hand. Concerning outreach, respondents encouraged the group leadership to organize a helpline that members could turn to in emergencies, and hosting service-oriented activities. Comments about the group’s website addressed some of these same issues; suggestions for improvement also raised issues of interactivity, including expanding the site’s contents to include more kinds of contributions by more members. Some ideas proposed were an interactive club blog, updated photo galleries that included photographs of new members, and the creation of a new section for the website where members could ask for/give advice or share information.

Strikingly, many survey respondents’ suggestions for the committee referred to the desirability of cultivating greater community involvement. *Native English speakers* emphasized the need to do more for English learners in Salento. One suggestion was to offer prizes for top young English learners and perhaps to involve local businesses or other organizations in the activity. Another was to hold “English in the Piazza Day” featuring storytelling, games, and food. Several respondents encouraged the Committee to increase

advertising to include more outlets read regularly by locally born prospective members, such as Italian-language Facebook sites. Another proposed that honorary membership be extended to city officials because the involvement of city leaders might create new pathways for community involvement.

Responses by *non-native English speakers* emphasized the importance of using social media and advertising in Italian-language print and online outlets including the key local newspapers and magazines. A respondent suggested inviting a local newspaper reporter to cover some especially significant Philosopher’s Table events.

As a result of the survey, the club’s leadership committee learned a great deal about who their members were and their interests, including in how it might expand community reach and contribute to the good of the community. It was clear that both native English-speakers and non-native English speakers felt that nurturing cross-cultural relationships was a strength and draw of membership, and that members’ fluency in English was considered an underutilized asset that could serve the larger community.

Discussion

Successful voluntary associations established with a specific purpose in mind need to be attentive to both participants’ perceived needs and to the stated goals that brought about the creation of the organization itself. This balancing act is not necessarily simple, nor can it be maintained if group leaders do not recognize the potential need for adjustments throughout the association’s life-cycle. Associations such as The Philosopher’s Table are among those most likely to face challenges in achieving this balance because, even when the stated mission of an organization serves as a fundamental reason for members having joined in the first place, continued member-benefit cannot be assumed. The fact remains that members expect returns that are non-monetary but important for their sustained participation. In the present case, hoped-for returns include establishing social relationships across cultural difference, and a sense of being part of and contributing to a multicultural community.

A member can, of course, quickly remove himself or herself from a club that they feel does not meet one’s needs. In this regard, for example, Sundblom *et al.* emphasize that the social dimension associated with the decision or choice to join a voluntary association is both an important resource and a potential cause for the group’s dissolution (2020: 15). The Philosopher’s Table leadership recognized the potential for the health crisis to affect the group’s

viability as members could not interact in the ways to which they had been accustomed. Club leaders' behavior at least implicitly revealed their belief that the group played a valuable role in promoting multicultural relations in Salento and that it was their responsibility to support that goal during the pandemic and beyond. Hence they took the novel step (for this organization) of creating a survey while they persisted in their quest to schedule monthly presentations and create a virtual space to reinforce social bonds throughout a difficult two-year period. During those dark days, the club was a social lifeline and diversion. On one evening, in fact, participants were offered the opportunity to engage in a pub quiz/trivia contest with teams and break-out rooms on Zoom. To be sure, every interaction, even on Zoom, was appreciated and praised by members.

The Philosopher's Table also took steps to address its continued viability by deploying its first survey, in which members as well as people who had decided not to join the club were encouraged to participate. Seeking the input of others – including non-members – was an affirmation of the notion that The Philosopher's Table is indeed part of a larger multicultural community.

In some ways, the Philosopher's Table has already succeeded. For example, many respondents suggested that hosting more activities was desirable given that knowing more about this area's rich history and culture should be of interest to anyone in the community. Since health restrictions on public gatherings were lifted, the club has organized museum outings, visits to local landmarks and emerging sites of interest, as well as some outdoor activities, and insured that they were publicized even more robustly than previously to the larger public. Each has been well attended by the English-speaking community which, as this note has explained, includes native speakers, Italians, and some other expatriate immigrants. Here we return to Harris's caution, mentioned earlier, regarding how the "need to give high priority to meeting individual members' needs [...] can make it difficult to maintain longer term vision [...] (Harris 1998: 147). The leadership of The Philosopher's Table, however, is playing the long game. Its vision includes expanding community-oriented activities as well as being attentive to "social interactional benefits such as friendship, mutual support, and exchange of news through their participation in meetings and activities" (1998: 148), while at the same time strengthening its role as an English-speaking resource to the community.

In a recent article on a community project that brought local residents and Syrian refugees together in Amsterdam for cultural and language exchanges,

Kim discussed the success of a Community Diner and a Language Café program. Kim stated that the diner and café projects were successful due to open discussions concerning the types of “programs to run and how to run them, what part each participant would play, and what material and other resources they could mobilize. In such discussions, newcomers and non-regular participants were invited to join [regularly participating] [...] local residents” (Kim 2022: 429). This discussion has presented early findings from a project on multicultural clubs in Puglia that also explores – albeit in a markedly different setting – how long-term members, newcomers, and non-regular participants in a multicultural club participated in a survey that brought to the fore and reinforced the importance of the group as a space to initiate and maintain highly valued cross-cultural social relationships and as a vehicle that brings unique value to a diverse community. The survey was designed to be inclusive. It was open to members and others who had participated in a club activity but chosen not to join, and respondents could comment in English or in Italian, notwithstanding that English is the club’s official language. The active steps taken by the Philosopher’s Table to assess where it stands and its own response given that information may be considered by other multicultural leisure associations when they too examine the importance of member-benefit and social integration. As this project unfolds, it will be instructive to compare the experiences of The Philosopher’s Table with similar groups in Italy and elsewhere that adopted different strategies in their quest to “survive the pandemic” and to compare future initiatives with those implemented during those very difficult years.

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No potential conflicts of interest were reported by the authors.

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Una traversata tra letteratura e antropologia

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Andrea CANOBBIO | *La traversata notturna*, Milano, La nave di Teseo, 2022, pp. 520; **Renzo GUOLO** | *Michel Leiris etnologo*, Milano, Meltemi, 2022, pp. 274.

È indubbio che i rapporti tra antropologia e letteratura – in senso ampio – siano piuttosto complicati. Mi piace pensare a questa relazione come a quella tra due amanti che continuamente si riconcorrono, si ritrovano e si lasciano, senza poter veramente fare a meno l’una dell’altra. Nella storia della nostra disciplina troviamo momenti, stagioni e correnti in cui il rapporto si fa più stretto e altri in cui si arriva alla rottura. Nell’era mitica della fondazione, i rapporti sono tendenzialmente burrascosi: si pensi la rottura dell’amicizia tra Malinowski e Stas Witkiewicz – notevole esponente dell’avanguardia letteraria e artistica polacca – su cui Sobrero (2009) ha giustamente attirato la nostra attenzione quale simbolo dell’allontanamento dal mondo letterario da parte di un’antropologia in cerca di legittimazione come scienza. D’altro canto, la grande stagione dell’etnologia francese tra le due guerre è invece intessuta di rapporti intensi, per quanto non sempre facili, di dialogo con la letteratura e l’arte (Guolo 2021). Più vicina a noi, la fase post-modernista dell’antropologia angloamericana, contrassegnata da un’intensa riflessione sui rapporti con la scrittura non accademica e fortemente influenzata dalla critica letteraria è stata in parte anche una reazione a tendenze precedenti di rifiuto dell’influenza letteraria (Clifford 1999).

Ma al di là dei corsi e ricorsi storici, appaiono continuamente opere, tanto antropologiche quanto letterarie, che investono su questa relazione, nonostante tutto. Mi riferisco, per esempio, da un lato a tutte quelle etnografie

che fanno della narrazione, e del principio del montaggio poetico, la loro cifra, ben esemplificate dall'ultimo libro di Jason Pine (2019) sull'epidemia di metanfetamine nella provincia profonda americana e, in ambito italiano, al "racconto antropologico" di Martina Riina (2021) su un progetto educativo in uno dei quartieri marginali di Palermo. Ma forse ancora più interessanti, per testare i rapporti tra antropologia e letteratura, sono quelli che propongo di chiamare "romanzi antropologici" (Capello 2023a): quelle opere narrative in cui appare, in un ruolo centrale, un/una antropolog*. Tali romanzi sono una delle mie passioni, per soddisfare la quale non manca materiale, per quanto possa sembrare strano. Per il mondo anglofono, già qualche anno fa, Jeremy MacClancy (2005) ne aveva passati in rassegna qualche centinaio – numeri che fanno della figura dell'antropolog* una delle più presenti all'interno della letteratura contemporanea. E anche in Italia, sono usciti negli ultimi anni alcuni "romanzi antropologici" piuttosto significativi: penso, in primo luogo, a *Euforia* di Lily King (2016), che racconta, dietro a un velo romanzesco, le peripezie etnografiche e le vicende amorose che hanno unito Margaret Mead, Reo Fortune e Gregory Bateson in Nuova Guinea. O anche a *Il banchetto annuale della confraternita dei becchini* di Mathias Enard (2021), in cui un ingenuo antropologo alle prime armi si trova gettato in un villaggio della provincia francese. E soprattutto, all'ultimo romanzo di Wu Ming (2023), *UFO 78*, in cui l'antropologa torinese Milena volendo studiare "usi e costumi" degli ufologi, si trova a indagare un mistero ben più complesso, in un clima infestato dallo spettro del sequestro di Aldo Moro.

Da cosa dipende questa attrazione da parte dei romanzieri? Senza poter essere qui esaustivo, mi sembra di poter dire, seguendo anche MacClancy, che la figura dell'antropolog* permetta in questi lavori di generare una sorta di decentramento dello sguardo – come dimostra bene il romanzo di Wu Ming, in cui il personaggio di Milena ci porta a guardare all'Italia di fine anni Settanta, al nostro recente passato come allo stesso tempo qualcosa di molto prossimo e di alieno nella sua unicità culturale e politica. Analogamente, nel romanzo di Enard, la presenza di un etnologo nel nulla della provincia profonda (un nulla che copre realtà ambigue e bizzarre...) rafforza l'effetto di straniamento a cui mira tutta l'opera – straniamento che è del resto uno dei principali compiti dell'antropologia culturale (Comaroff, Comaroff 2019).

Tra i "romanzi antropologici" apparsi di recente in Italia, si distingue il bel libro di Andrea Canobbio, *La traversata notturna*, finalista al Premio Strega. Il libro si segnala, rispetto a quelli citati in precedenza, per il fatto che – an-

che se l'antropologia è una presenza costante – non abbiamo un antropologo come protagonista, né tantomeno è ambientato in terreni lontani ed esotici. Qui il terreno è la vicina e prosaica Torino, con la sua quasi perfetta planimetria, la sua collina e i suoi edifici più o meno storici, ma sempre carichi, nel libro, di un significato personale e collettivo. Una Torino ben poco letteraria, a prima vista, ma al centro di questo memoir familiare, che ruota intorno al padre dell'autore – ingegnere di fama – e al suo malessere psicologico, in cui l'autore sotto l'egida di Marcel Griaule e di Michel Leiris si fa in un certo qual modo “etnografo di sé stesso”.

All'arrivo dell'anno nuovo – ci racconta Canobbio – mi ero ritrovato immerso fino al collo nella lettura dell'*Africa fantasma*, ma quella che era iniziata come la distrazione suprema [...] aveva ormai raggiunto l'effetto paradossale di farmi tornare la voglia di scrivere, voglia di allontanarmi dalla scrivania e uscire di casa e cercare risposte alle domande che continuavano a girarmi in testa, come se pensassi di partire in missione e diventare etnografo di me stesso (2022: 229).

La traversata notturna è quindi un'esplorazione, un'immersione dell'autore nella “terra straniera” del suo passato familiare: la storia dei suoi genitori e del suo rapporto con loro, segnato da diversi problemi. Perché il vero protagonista è il padre, Lorenzo, progettista di diversi importanti edifici a Torino, meta delle esplorazioni del figlio in cerca di ricordi. Suo padre e il suo disagio, il suo malessere psichico ed esistenziale, che lo colpì quando l'autore era ancora giovane per non lasciarlo più. Attraverso questa traversata, questo viaggio di esplorazione del campo della memoria familiare, Canobbio – senza nessuna vera linearità, come se si trattasse di appunti dal diario di campo piuttosto che una monografia – sembra voler dimostrare due cose, solo all'apparenza contraddittorie: che la depressione cronica del padre ha segnato, se non rovinato, tutta la loro vita e, allo stesso tempo, che la vita del padre non è riducibile alla malattia.

Come lui stesso racconta a vicenda ormai già inoltrata, l'autore si è sentito chiamato a questo compito quando, dopo la morte della madre, le sue due sorelle maggiori gli affidarono le lettere che i genitori si erano scambiati, negli anni della Guerra e subito dopo, durante il fidanzamento, lettere che andarono a unirsi ai diari del padre – di lavoro, più che veramente personali (ma l'ingegner Canobbio era totalmente dedito al suo lavoro) – che erano già in suo possesso. Era comunque da tempo che Canobbio sentiva di dover ricostruire e narrare la loro storia, al punto da confessare che tutti i suoi precedenti romanzi in realtà trasfigurano la sofferenza del padre e le tensioni

familiari, ma ammette: era un compito gravoso che ha cercato di evitare per anni. Aggirandolo anche – come si è visto con la citazione precedente – grazie alla lettura di testi antropologici, allo studio dell’etnografia dei Dogon scritta da Griaule e Calame-Griaule in particolare. Ma appunto l’antropologia si è rivelata, nel corso degli anni dedicati alla scrittura del memoir, non solo una originale distrazione e neppure solo uno stimolo, bensì un riferimento costante, un appoggio e una fonte di suggestioni per leggere la propria vita.

Da dove viene a Canobbio questa passione per l’antropologia culturale, per l’etnologia francese, per essere più precisi? Un interesse – sistematico, fatto di vero studio – che si sostanzia nel libro in riferimenti costanti alla cosmologia dogon (la Volpe pallida è lo spirito-guida nel corso del suo viaggio nella memoria...), a numerose citazioni tratte dalle opere di Leiris, a rimandi a Lévi-Strauss. La genealogia è letteraria, non accademica, come dichiara lo stesso autore. Calvino, Queneau e poi Perec, le sue prime passioni letterarie, lo hanno condotto a Leiris (per il quale Perec aveva una vera venerazione) e Leiris a Griaule e ai Dogon. Antropologia e letteratura che si richiamano a vicenda, dunque.

Perec e Leiris, questi due maestri del dialogo tra letteratura e antropologia, sono i modelli di Canobbio anche per quanto riguarda la scrittura, la quale non ha però nulla del tono freddo di certe pagine di Perec, tendendo piuttosto a una tonalità calda, suadente e sentimentale. Ma Canobbio, per raccontare la sua storia familiare ha fatto ricorso a uno di quegli espedienti che così tanto piacevano a Perec. Ha infatti suddiviso la cartina di Torino – dove è nato e cresciuto – in 81 caselle da percorrere usando la mossa del cavallo per esplorare la città in modo quasi casuale alla ricerca di ricordi personali e familiari. Ogni casella, corrispondente a un capitolo, rimanda infatti all’associazione tra un luogo – quartiere, via, piazza, edificio (tra cui spesso quelli progettati dal padre) e un frammento di memoria autobiografica o tratto dall’archivio familiare.

Grazie a questa sapiente costruzione, affiorano più efficacemente la sofferenza del padre e i tentativi della madre di tenere tutto sotto controllo, senza destare scandalo o troppo disagio, suscitando un certo rancore sordo, mescolato all’amore, nel figlio; le crisi paterne e le varie e inutili cure; ma anche la gioia dei giorni del fidanzamento tra i genitori, l’impegno del padre negli studi – condotti durante e subito dopo la Guerra – nel lavoro e nel costruirsi una famiglia. Il tutto riletto e rielaborato dallo sguardo dell’autore, affinato dalle sue ricche letture antropologiche.

Anche per questo motivo, molte delle pagine del libro sembrano riallacciarsi al breve capolavoro di Leiris *Il sacro nella vita quotidiana* (1991a), presentato

dall'etnologo francese in uno degli incontri dell'ormai mitico Collège de Sociologie¹. Come in quel saggio epocale, l'infanzia e la giovinezza si presentano come un'epoca e un mondo carichi di simboli e di rituali da decifrare senza mai giungere a un significato ultimo. Di quel saggio è stato spesso detto che può essere visto come una "etnografia di sé" da parte di Leiris, il quale però non ha mai sottoscritto tale lettura, affermando che se avesse voluto scrivere un'auto-etnografia avrebbe dato più spazio alle dimensioni collettive e ai rapporti sociali, non solo alla dimensione simbolica dell'infanzia (Maubon 2005). Certo, nel libro di Canobbio, i riferimenti all'ambiente sociale, alla realtà della classe media torinese e alla professione del padre non mancano. Tuttavia, si potrebbe dire che *La traversata notturna*, sia, piuttosto che un'etnografia, un'antropologia del sé. Mi richiamo qui alla nota distinzione tracciata da Tim Ingold, sicuramente contestabile, ma nondimeno stimolante: se fare "antropologia", piuttosto che limitarsi alla mera descrizione etnografica, significa pensare con le persone, è a questo che ci troviamo di fronte nelle pagine del libro. Canobbio pensa insieme e grazie ai suoi "informati" di famiglia, per produrre una profonda riflessione sulla malattia e la sofferenza, sull'istituzione familiare e le tensioni che sempre la attraversano. La lettura di questo originale romanzo auto-antropologico si rivela allora un'esperienza che dà concretezza a quanto Leiris ha scritto in uno dei suoi saggi più memorabili, *Francis Bacon o la verità urlante*: "Non esiste individuo che non sia particella effimera dell'universo biologico e al tempo stesso un intero mondo a sé stante" (Leiris 2001: 23).

E il mondo a sé stante dello stesso Leiris – partendo dalla prospettiva del suo lavoro etnografico – è ciò che si propone di ricostruire l'approfondito studio di Renzo Guolo *Michel Leiris etnologo* (2022), che si riallaccia direttamente all'appena precedente volume sulla storia dell'etnologia francese, *I ferventi* (Guolo 2021), in cui già erano presenti diverse parti dedicate allo scrittore ed etnologo parigino. Concentrandosi totalmente su colui che è stato forse non il migliore degli etnologi francesi, ma sicuramente il più originale e generoso, il volume di Guolo permette di mettere a fuoco, in Leiris, gli elementi di continuità – come l'attrazione per il "sacro sinistro" e la passione per la cultura africana – e la progressiva maturazione scientifica, i momenti di entusiasmo per la disciplina così come i periodi di sconforto e di delusione, propri di un

1. Sul Collège, oltre all'introduzione di Hollier (1991) all'edizione critica dei testi riconducibili a questa originale esperienza, e al classico studio di Clifford (1999), si vedano ora Capello (2023b) e Palma (2023).

autore unico per il suo duplice impegno nella ricerca letteraria come in quella antropologica.

Leiris è, come abbiamo visto, uno degli spiriti-guida di Canobbio – proprio per via della sua doppia natura di scrittore-etnologo e in quanto modello esemplare di scrittura autobiografica radicale. Un impegno di scrittura all’insegna dell’onestà portato avanti dallo scrittore francese tutta la vita, incarnato dapprima in *Età d’uomo* del 1939 (Leiris 1991b), la sua personale riflessione sulla linea d’ombra che prelude all’adulità, e in seguito nei quattro volumi de *La règle du jeu* del 1948 (Leiris 2010), che gli hanno assicurato un posto d’onore nelle lettere francesi. Del resto, come mostra bene anche la ricerca di Guolo, non ha senso distinguere in Leiris i diversi piani della sua scrittura – l’antropologia dalla critica d’arte, l’etnografia dalla letteratura.

Il che è particolarmente vero per opere come *Il sacro nella vita quotidiana e L’Africa fantasma* (Leiris 2020), ovviamente, che sono allo stesso tempo esperimenti letterari e antropologici, all’incrocio tra riflessione e autobiografia e direttamente legati al suo primo grande testo autobiografico, *Età d’uomo*. Anche da un punto di vista “metodologico”: Leiris ha dichiarato che i metodi di raccolta etnografica appresi sul campo nel corso della spedizione Dakar-Djibuti del 1931, l’importante missione guidata da Griaule, cui è dedicata la cronaca diaristica dell’*Africa fantasma* – metodi come la redazione sistematica del diario di campo, la riproduzione e catalogazione di schede e interviste ecc. – si rivelarono preziosi per il suo progetto autobiografico.

Sebbene, in seguito, i confini tra produzione antropologica e quella letteraria si fecero in Leiris più netti – anche per via dei rilievi da parte di molti colleghi, ricorda Guolo – le due anime del suo lavoro si richiamano continuamente. Resta però vero che il peso e il valore della sua opera poetica, letteraria e di critica d’arte – per cui è principalmente conosciuto al di fuori della nostra disciplina – rischia di mettere in ombra il suo impegno scientifico e accademico in quanto antropologo. È noto del resto che lo stesso Leiris definiva l’etnologia il suo “secondo mestiere”, pensandosi innanzitutto come scrittore. Bene ha fatto dunque Guolo a riprendere e valorizzare il contributo etnografico e antropologico dell’autore parigino, che resta significativo anche a distanza di tempo e che non può essere ridotto solo all’*Africa fantasma*, la quale, nonostante il suo valore di libro unico e rivoluzionario, rappresenta giusto una parte dell’opera etnologica di Leiris. Nella quale si stagliano lavori come *L’etnografo davanti al colonialismo* (2005) e *La possessione e i suoi aspetti teatrali tra gli etiopi di Gondar* (1988), ai quali Guolo dedica giustamente ampio spazio

nel suo libro, sottolineandone tutto il loro valore. Il famoso intervento sul colonialismo tenuto nel 1950 non solo rappresenta, di fatto, la prima denuncia delle collusioni tra antropologia e potere coloniale, ma delinea in maniera chiara, in anticipo di decenni sullo sviluppo disciplinare, i doveri dell'antropolog* in quanto portavoce e difensore dei popoli colonizzati, con considerazioni di metodo, politiche ancora pienamente attuali. Mentre in quello che è, sicuramente, il suo capolavoro antropologico, basato sul suo soggiorno a Gondor all'origine della più riuscita e vissuta esperienza di terreno nel corso della Dakar-Djibuti, sembrano fondersi – sotto forma di distillato etnografico – buona parte dei molteplici interessi dell'autore, perché l'etnografia sfugge all'aridità scienziata per unirsi all'arte e al teatro e la scrittura si innalza verso la piena letteratura. E perché lo studio etnografico del culto etiope degli zar si rivela come una rielaborazione di quella passione per il sacro, l'estasi, il sogno e il simbolismo propria di quella prima stagione surrealista di cui Leiris fu uno dei più vivi animatori.

Arte, poesia, letteratura e antropologia sono, in Leiris, le molteplici facce di uno stesso impegno, esistenziale prima ancora che intellettuale. Esistenziale perché, per questo studioso, l'antropologia – così come la letteratura – sono state anche un modo per resistere a quella depressione che lo ha attanagliato tutta la vita, elemento che avvicina ulteriormente la sua opera a Canobbio e al suo libro, che al male di vivere è dedicato.

Nel saggio *La letteratura considerata come tauromachia*, posto a introduzione di *Età d'uomo*, Leiris afferma che la "letteratura maggiore", in particolare autobiografica, è per lui quella in cui "il corno è presente, in una forma o in un'altra: come rischio diretto affrontato dall'autore di una confessione [...] o come atteggiamento in cui la condizione umana è guardata in faccia o 'presa per le corna' [...]" (1991b: 22). Il corno, ci ricorda Guolo, è sempre presente anche nelle opere antropologiche di Leiris, non solo in quelle letterarie – e, sicuramente, balugina anche nelle pagine di Canobbio.

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RECENSIONI

Francesco APERGI | *I mezzadri e i trovatelli. Famiglie e senza famiglia nei poderi del Mugello (secoli XIX-XX)*, Firenze, Società editrice fiorentina, 2023, pp. 108.

Il testo di Francesco Aperi apre un filone di ricerca su un tema che era stato fino a oggi poco approfondito nella letteratura sulla mezzadria toscana. Eppure, si tratta uno di quegli oggetti che, oltre a esercitare grande interesse a livello locale, possono offrire un contributo essenziale alla riflessione antropologica su argomenti centrali nella disciplina – nello specifico, la famiglia, i ruoli sociali e di genere, le politiche assistenziali e di gestione dell’infanzia.

Argomento del libro è il rapporto che tra Otto e Novecento si era creato tra lo Spedale degli Innocenti, istituzione assistenziale fiorentina che dal 1445 accoglieva bambini abbandonati (i “trovatelli”, che di lì in poi sarebbero stati chiamati, con chiaro riferimento all’istituzione, “nocentini”), e le famiglie mezzadrili mugellane cui a partire dalla seconda metà del XVIII secolo molti dei piccoli abbandonati venivano affidati, secondo una precisa politica della dirigenza degli Innocenti, che vedeva nelle campagne e nella “bontà naturale” dei “selvaggi” mezzadri “la miglior polizza per la riuscita degli affidamenti” (p. X). Confrontando dati d’archivio con una solida bibliografia di riferimento, l’autore cerca di ricostruire la dimensione e la consistenza del fenomeno, interrogandosi sui legami tra sistema mezzadrile e affidamenti, anche al di là degli specifici orientamenti politici dell’Istituto: quali sono state, in particolare, le circostanze e le ragioni che hanno reso il Mugello, più che altre campagne altrettanto prossime alla città (Valdisieve, Valdarno, o l’area del Chianti fiorentino, per esempio), “alma terra nutrice di poveri bastardi”, secondo la definizione di un osservatore fiorentino dell’Ottocento (p. 60)? Quali le prospettive che rendevano conveniente o appetibile, per le famiglie mezzadrili della zona, la presa in carico di un/a “nocentino/a”? Quali, viceversa,



le logiche che spesso costringevano, dopo un periodo variabile ma raramente lungo di affidamento, alla restituzione dei bambini all'Istituto?

Il testo riesce a estrapolare dai dati d'archivio, prevalentemente quantitativi, considerazioni di tipo più propriamente qualitativo, rendendo evidente l'utilità di tenere insieme i due piani. I numeri, in questo modo, aprono una finestra sul cortile dei poteri, per far cogliere al lettore alcuni aspetti dell'organizzazione sociale contadina che sarebbe più difficile comprendere altrimenti. I dati relativi alla mobilità delle famiglie mezzadrili tra i vari poteri, per esempio, ci consentono di rivedere l'idea del "mondo contadino del passato" come un mondo statico, quasi immobile. In realtà, come è stato dimostrato anche in altri studi sulla famiglia mezzadrile (tutti citati nel testo), la stanzialità era un'eccezione. O meglio, un'aspirazione per i contadini, perché stanzialità equivaleva a maggior disponibilità di risorse e maggiori possibilità di trasmettere questi mezzi alle generazioni più giovani. Ma appunto la realtà era molto diversa, e la mobilità e la precarietà erano la cifra della vita contadina, non la stabilità o la sicurezza. (Avranno queste dinamiche condizionato, in qualche misura, le modalità dell'abitare in Toscana e in Mugello nel presente? Domanda a cui risponde, in parte, l'ampia letteratura sulla famiglia e sull'abitare nella regione).

Le possibilità di rimanere sullo stesso podere dipendevano da diverse variabili, tra cui evidentemente il numero di "braccia" su cui la famiglia poteva contare: in questo senso, i trovatelli avevano una *funzione* nella famiglia mezzadrile, legata alle esigenze di organizzazione del lavoro. Allo stesso modo, il rapporto tra il numero di uomini e di donne presenti nel nucleo, e quello tra persone coniugate e non coniugate, erano fattori determinanti per la produttività. Così, per esempio, "La condizione celibataria dei sibling maschi [...] è l'esito di una scelta strategica finalizzata a dare continuità alla permanenza sul podere [...]. Al fratello *bizzo* sono assegnati compiti lavorativi di particolare gravosità, che gli altri fratelli coresidenti non potrebbero assolvere con la stessa esclusiva dedizione, perché distratti dalle cure dei rispettivi nuclei coniugali" (p. 44).

Si capisce di conseguenza come le esigenze produttive, e più in generale le condizioni materiali della vita contadina, influenzassero in maniera determinante i modi culturali di pensare le relazioni, gli affetti, e in generale le concezioni del mondo e della vita. C'è stato un tempo, insomma – e nemmeno troppi anni fa –, in cui a definire il ruolo del soggetto nella famiglia, le sue aspirazioni e le traiettorie di vita, non erano il desiderio o la volontà – e

nemmeno la sua abilità relazionale, l'attrattiva estetica, eccetera. Erano, piuttosto, esigenze economico-produttive e priorità sociali – dunque l'equilibrio “tenacemente perseguito tra risorse disponibili e composizione demografica del nucleo” (p. 34), sul quale l'eventuale introduzione di nuovi membri esercitava chiaramente un peso.

E tuttavia una lettura deterministicamente “materialista” di queste dinamiche non regge, ci fa capire Apergi, alla prova dei dati. Il celibato, per esempio, era “una condizione non scelta ma pressoché obbligata” (p. 44) nella famiglia contadina (al punto che sorprendentemente, fa notare l'autore, si scopre che in certi casi erano le donne ad avere più libertà in relazione alle prospettive coniugali, perché potevano sposarsi e uscire dal nucleo senza rispettare le norme che obbligavano invece i maschi ad andare “in fila”, dal primogenito al più giovane). Soprattutto, era una scelta necessaria per favorire la produttività e aspirare così alla stanzialità del nucleo. Ciononostante, lo stigma associato allo status di nubile, riscontrabile per esempio negli appellativi irridenti attribuiti alla figura dello “zio” (“castrone”, “mezzomo”, e così via), ci fa capire che non necessariamente la dimensione culturale corrisponde(va) meccanicamente a quella “strutturale”, sociale ed economica. Altrimenti, come si spiegano la svalorizzazione e il sospetto per una figura tanto indispensabile (era il fratello celibe, spesso, che assumeva il ruolo di “capoccia” nella famiglia)? Ugualmente, le (rare, ma comunque significative) storie dei trovatelli che sono entrati a tutti gli effetti a far parte delle famiglie affidatarie mostrano come la componente emotiva e affettiva esercitasse sulle relazioni una forza complementare, e certe volte contraria, rispetto a quella esercitata dalle priorità produttive. Molte delle persone che a Scarperia, in Mugello, hanno riempito il 15 giugno 2023 la sala in cui si è svolta la presentazione del libro di Apergi, cui ho partecipato come relatore, hanno confessato che la ricerca aveva destato il loro interesse proprio per il ruolo che qualche nocentino aveva avuto nelle loro famiglie. Questo, in maniera stimolante, ha trasformato la presentazione in una sorta di momento di “restituzione” da parte dell'antropologo ai protagonisti della sua ricerca.

L'interesse “locale” per il testo permette all'indagine di Apergi di realizzare il valore potenziale della conoscenza antropologica per la comprensione del passato, ma anche di temi di grande attualità (nella prospettiva di una *Antropologia come educazione*, Tim Ingold, La Linea, 2019). L'interpretazione dei dati che ho cercato brevemente di sintetizzare qui permette per esempio al non addetto ai lavori di comprendere, con riferimento diretto alla sua stessa

esperienza di vita, la relatività dei concetti di famiglia o di “genitorialità”, che cambiano non solo tra culture diverse, ma anche all’interno della stessa cultura, sia sincronicamente (tra le famiglie dei mezzadri e quelle dei braccianti, per esempio) che diacronicamente.

Il lavoro di Apergi traccia, infine, piste per ulteriori indagini. In particolare, la sua analisi delle fonti d’archivio porta immediatamente il lettore antropologo a pensare alla potenziale ricchezza di un’integrazione della ricerca con dati qualitativi, relativi chiaramente alla parte più recente del periodo considerato nel testo. In particolare, attraverso le fonti orali e iconografiche, sarebbe utile sollecitare la memoria di chi ha avuto, in casa, nonni, genitori o parenti nocentini. Questo permetterebbe di ricostruire la dimensione effettivamente vissuta della presenza dei trovatelli nelle famiglie ospitanti, ripercorrendo la componente esistenziale, affettiva, relazionale, e la quotidianità che ne scandivano le vite, al di là delle esigenze puramente (ri)produttive. Una conoscenza che potrebbe essere ricostruita ripercorrendo le storie di vita delle persone che, come quelle presenti alla presentazione di Scarperia, conservano con particolare affezione i ricordi legati ai propri avi trovatelli.

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RECENSIONI

Alessandra BRIVIO | *Serpenti, sirene e sacerdotesse. Antropologia dei mondi acquatici in Africa occidentale*, Roma, Viella, 2023, pp. 216.

Nel 1919 Max Weber, ne *La scienza come professione*, aveva teorizzato il “disincanto del mondo”, ovvero quel processo di scientificizzazione della cultura occidentale che avrebbe portato la fine del ricorso a entità misteriose, magiche o trascendenti per spiegare i fenomeni naturali. Secondo la prospettiva evoluzionista, anche in Africa, a lungo ritenuta la culla di un certo paganesimo primordiale, la modernità avrebbe prima o poi determinato la scomparsa delle cosiddette religioni tradizionali.

Alessandra Brivio, nel suo ultimo libro edito da Viella, sfida questi presupposti per restituire invece una narrazione complessa dei rapporti tra gli esseri umani, l’ambiente acquatico, le numerose divinità che tutt’ora abitano la fascia costiera che va dal confine tra Ghana e Costa d’Avorio a quello tra Bénin e Nigeria e che, nonostante la progressiva e inesorabile distruzione del loro ecosistema, “non sembrano avere intenzione di abbandonare la complessità del loro mondo mistico” (p. 14).

Attraverso un accurato intreccio dei dati etnografici, raccolti in più di quindici anni di ricerche sul campo, con i materiali d’archivio e i resoconti di viaggiatori, commercianti di schiavi, missionari e funzionari coloniali, Brivio mette in luce come già nel diciassettesimo secolo il “mondo incantato” dialogasse con la modernità. Affrontando periodi storici anche molto distanti tra loro, l’autrice evidenzia la capacità delle religioni di quest’area di adattarsi ai cambiamenti, inglobando nuovi culti in grado di rispondere di volta in volta ai bisogni che si presentano. A fare da filo rosso sono proprio le entità visibili e invisibili, umane e spirituali che abitano gli ecosistemi acquatici, protagoniste del libro insieme alle adepti e le sacerdotesse che ne praticano i culti.



La lente di genere che caratterizza questo lavoro, come anche altri di Alessandra Brivio, è forse uno degli elementi più interessanti, poiché consente di rileggere criticamente le descrizioni che storicamente sono state fatte del rapporto tra la dimensione femminile e quella religiosa in questa regione dell’Africa.

Nei resoconti di viaggio scritti tra il XVII e il XIX secolo ha prevalso una visione esotizzante delle sacerdotesse, che le ritraeva in modo erotizzato come immorali detentrici di ruoli di potere. Al contrario, i primi lavori antropologici della prima metà del XX secolo hanno ribaltato questa visione, descrivendo le donne più come “passivi supporti delle divinità, e mettendo in luce il loro ruolo di vittime all’interno di un primitivo sistema patriarcale” (p. 15). La tendenza si è poi di nuovo invertita a partire dagli anni Settanta del Novecento, quando le religioni tradizionali africane sono state rimesse al centro dell’interesse dall’antropologia femminista. Queste furono interpretate, o sovra-interpretate, secondo quella che Brivio chiama la “trappola nativista” (p. 189), cioè immaginate come spazi atavici di espressione del potere femminile, progressivamente distrutti e corrotti dall’incontro con il cristianesimo e con le politiche coloniali (p. 189). L’autrice invita i lettori a non cadere in nessuna di queste possibili “trappole” e restituisce invece una descrizione densa e articolata delle storie delle sacerdotesse e delle adeptes. Da una parte, si avvale delle preziose riformulazioni dei concetti di libertà, di potere e di *agency* operate negli ultimi anni all’interno dei dibattiti del femminismo post-coloniale che hanno liberato questi concetti dalle categorie interpretative emancipatorie occidentali; dall’altra, tiene sempre in considerazione la concezione di persona presente nella cosmologia *vodu*, cioè quella di una individualità pensata come articolata e multipla, dotata di un corpo sempre aperto alle interferenze esterne, passate e presenti, sociali, spirituali o ambientali (p. 153).

Il primo capitolo è dedicato a una mappatura delle divinità e delle forze cosmiche che abitano gli ecosistemi acquatici della zona, dalle tranquille acque lagunari, fino alle ondose e violente acque oceaniche, che evocano “l’eternità di una forza rigeneratrice” (p. 22). Come messo in luce dall’autrice, le acque dell’oceano e quelle dolci non sono due sistemi separati, anzi, confluiscono le une nelle altre in diversi punti, e proprio queste confluenze condizionarono storicamente gli insediamenti di popolazioni in alcune specifiche aree, ricoprendo anche un ruolo non indifferente nei rapporti con la tratta atlantica. Le acque, inoltre, oltre a essere abitate da innumerevoli entità numinose come serpenti, sirene, alligatori, pesci e altri spiriti sovrannaturali, possono talvol-

ta essere percepite esse stesse come delle divinità che, con le loro “ecologie morali”, coordinano le relazioni tra natura, esseri umani e entità sovranaturali (p. 32). Nel secondo capitolo, dedicato ai culti ofidici, l'autrice propone una lettura storica delle rappresentazioni religiose e mitologiche del serpente, localmente considerato simbolo di ricchezza, fertilità e associato alla dimensione acquatica. Si mette in luce, ad esempio, come le prime testimonianze dei viaggiatori che osservavano i culti del pitone Dangbé siano permeate da un simbolismo occidentale che insisteva sulla natura peccaminosa del rapporto femminile con questo animale. Dalla figura biblica di Eva, passando per le donne-serpente greche e la mitologica fata Melusina di epoca medievale, queste rappresentazioni hanno poi contribuito a consolidare una serie di stereotipi sulla donna-serpente come divoratrice di uomini, stereotipi che saranno poi alla base dell'immaginario legato a Mami-Wata. Proprio all'iconica dea africana, sirena e incantatrice di serpenti, è dedicato il terzo capitolo. Partendo dall'analisi di come l'iconografia di Mami-Wata si sia innestata su degli immaginari preesistenti di altre divinità acquatiche, l'autrice propone una riflessione che si sviluppa su due fronti: da un lato sottolinea la performatività delle immagini e il loro ruolo nella sfera religiosa, dall'altro riflette su come queste stesse immagini abbiano reso Mami-Wata l'incarnazione di un modello di modernità deviante. Il quarto capitolo mette al centro proprio questo ambiguo rapporto tra ricchezza, accumulazione di denaro e morte, e, come scrive l'autrice, fa emergere “il lato annichilente del simbolismo acquatico, qui esasperato dal convergere della storia della tratta atlantica con una concezione cosmologica che identifica il mare come il luogo verso il quale si incamminano i morti” (p. 24). Il quinto capitolo, infine, si concentra sulle storie di vita di alcune donne e sulle loro esperienze come adepte o sacerdotesse. Nelle loro parole e nei racconti delle loro traiettorie esistenziali riemergono con forza molti dei temi trattati nel libro. Il rapporto che lega le loro vite a quelle delle divinità, degli antenati e di altre forze spirituali è intricato, coercitivo e talvolta violento, fatto di regole da rispettare e rituali iniziatici cui sottoporsi periodicamente, in una continua ricerca del sé. Ma solo tenendo in considerazione la sopracitata concezione trans-corporea e “rizomatica” della persona è possibile comprendere le scelte e le strategie messe in atto dalle sacerdotesse descritte da Brivio. In questo modo l'antropologa le sottrae dal ruolo di vittime di una “tradizione atavica” e mette in luce come anzi, “proprio all'interno dello spazio della tradizione, le donne possono trovare strumenti efficaci per riconfigurare le proprie esistenze” (p. 198), sempre in equilibrio

tra le aspirazioni economiche della modernità e le reti di dipendenza, visibili e invisibili, in cui sono inserite.

In definitiva, l'invito dell'autrice è quello di lasciare che "il mondo incantato" da lei descritto, pur con le sue innumerevoli contraddizioni, possa aprire la strada per "immaginare condizioni e possibilità di vita diverse", in cui le persone sono inserite "in una rete che include il passato e il futuro, il visibile e l'invisibile, la natura e la cultura", e in cui ognuno di questi elementi incide e dà significato alla realtà che ci circonda (p. 199).

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RECENSIONI

Alessandra CIUCCI | *The voice of the rural. Music, Poetry and Masculinity among Migrant Moroccan Men in Umbria*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2022, pp. 228.

Il libro di Ciucci è scorrevole e piacevolissimo: accompagna il lettore nei percorsi dell'autrice seguendo un impianto cronologico e tematico. È ricchissimo di riferimenti bibliografici, connette i dati di terreno con un'impostazione teorica di matrice post-coloniale. Forte di una esperienza sul campo in Marocco, Ciucci ha potuto innestare l'indagine tra gli immigrati marocchini in Umbria su una ricerca precedente di etnomusicologia in ambito rurale: l'etnografia italiana si configura, così, come una diramazione di corollari di una teoria più vasta già maturata in Marocco. Secondo questa teoria un timbro di voce aspro (*harsh*), tipico dei dialetti ma anche delle musiche locali (in particolare *'aita*, *'abidat r-rma* e le loro versioni contemporanee classificate come *sha'bi*), connoterebbe le popolazioni rurali delle pianure e degli altopiani atlantici da cui provengono gli intervistati: questa "voce rurale" (*sawt l-'arubiya*), percepita come un marcatore di origine, classe e livello di civilizzazione, e associata a tratti sociali e morali, sottenderebbe una costruzione negativa della figura del campagnolo (*l-'arubiy*), arretrato e primitivo (pp. 10-13, 30-53, 63-64).

La teoria elaborata in Italia riguarda immigrati lavoratori, residenti in Umbria, provenienti dai luoghi studiati dall'autrice in Marocco: essi si riunirebbero per ascoltare e ballare le musiche dei paesi natali, ovvero *sawt l-'arubiya*, "la voce rurale" d'origine, al fine di continuare a sentirsi "uomini veri" (nel senso di "esseri umani" e "maschi virili"), rispondendo e reagendo così ad un paese inospitale e razzista che li disprezza e invisibilizza:

Entangled with a sense of place, longing and belonging, the idea of *l-'arubiya* becomes particularly meaningful in Italy because it also articulates a personhood rooted in a masculinity that is itself problematically perceived and ultimately denied to these men. This book posits that these migrants are able to recover such personhood through what is commonly referred to

as *sawt l-'arubiya* (the voice of the rural). It investigates *sawt al-'arubiya* as a means for these migrants to reclaim a way to being in the world: through music, poetry, and the voice, they claim a space in contemporary Italy and turn their ears away from an integration rhetoric that rejects their difference (p. 4).

Nel libro traspare lo spirito militante e la compassione dell'autrice per gli informatori: immigrati senza diritti, sfruttati, emarginati e oggetto di comportamenti razzisti. Il testo di Ciucci mi ha insegnato tanto e obbligato a ripensare ad una ricerca effettuata nell'Alta Valle del Tevere umbro, luogo che ancora frequento e in cui mantengo contatti con alcuni informatori dal 1992.

La tesi del libro è accattivante, ma convince solo parzialmente. Innanzitutto l'analisi della relazione tra ambienti urbani e rurali risente di una desueta impostazione post-coloniale che oppone antitetivamente questi due termini invece di mostrarne la complessa dialettica nel corso della storia (pp. 22-23, 127). Le campagne di cui sono originari gli informatori non possono più essere - secondo l'antico paradigma coloniale francese - meramente contrapposte alle città ed essere considerate luoghi periferici, emarginati, esclusi: esse sono ormai l'oggetto di attente politiche statali di patrimonializzazione riguardanti beni materiali e immateriali, dall'architettura all'agro-alimentare, al sufismo, alla musica.

Inoltre le tradizioni, anche musicali, della campagna (*l-'arubiya*) vengono percepite dalle popolazioni urbane in maniera contraddittoria: snobbate (per la persistenza del *cliché* pre-coloniale che le ritiene primitive), ma al tempo stesso desiderate, "performate" e messe in scena (sulla TV di stato e in feste private in cui vengono invitati gruppi di musica *sha'bi*), in quanto considerate rappresentative di un'identità marocchina "originaria". Per di più il governo cerca di manipolare e appropriarsi di tali tradizioni per controllare, oltre le derive islamiche all'interno del paese, anche i suoi emigrati all'estero, in funzione anti-islamica e anti-fondamentalista.

L'individualismo metodologico che orienta l'etnografia ci sembra limitare le potenzialità dell'analisi teorica. Il fatto di considerare i propri informatori degli individui, invece che membri di gruppi (parentali, tribali), non permetterebbe di vedere la sovrapposizione, per non dire coincidenza, tra il sistema di valori morali de *l-'arubiya* e il sistema etico tribale. L'impostazione teorica post-coloniale si espone al rischio dell'analisi meramente culturalista, dove la dimensione sociale scompare. Qui l'astratta separazione della dimensione culturale da quella sociale ha come conseguenza l'omissione di un'evidenza: il concetto di *'arubiya*, di cui si parla estesamente nel libro, non è altro che la

dimensione culturale dell'organizzazione parentale e tribale. Gli informatori non sono tutti celibi e, quand'anche lo fossero, restano fortemente legati ai parenti rimasti in madrepatria, proprio in forza dei valori *'arubiy*, che, in ultima istanza, sono l'espressione di legami sociali.

Un altro nodo metodologico, potenzialmente problematico, viene spiegato dall'autrice. La scelta di fare ricerca solo su migranti uomini, escludendo le donne, viene giustificata in questo modo: *l-'arubiya* sarebbe “deeply entangled with a construction of masculinity” (p. 25). Ora, posto che una ricerca non può occuparsi di tutto e sia necessario delimitarne l'oggetto, qui il focus sugli uomini sembra giustificato, piuttosto, da un pre-giudizio teorico e un'impostazione postcoloniale: “(...) I aim to situate discourses about masculinity within the larger colonial and imperialist context that portrays the West as advanced and modernized and the East as backward and underdeveloped” (p. 25).

Allo stato attuale delle nostre conoscenze, il sistema di valori rurale/tribale, qui riassunto dal concetto de *l-'arubiya*, lungi dall'essere concentrato prevalentemente sulla mascolinità, include anche concezioni e pratiche di ciò che una donna (rurale) “deve essere”. In questo senso, l'identità *'arubiy* maschile non è separabile dalla costruzione dell'identità femminile, essendo parte di un sistema sociale parentale e tribale in cui i generi sono integrati e interdipendenti. Peraltro, sappiamo che anche le immigrate marocchine *'arubiyyat* in Italia organizzano feste di sole donne in cui ascoltano e ballano musica *sha'bi*.

Ma andiamo al cuore della tesi. Siamo certi che l'ascolto collettivo della musica *sha'bi* da parte dei marocchini immigrati sia da interpretarsi come una risposta politica al contesto di non accoglienza in Italia (p. 176)? Come una rivendicazione, un reclamo (p. 4), una reazione antirazzista all'esclusione sociale, alla mancata integrazione? Come una sfida alla costruzione colonialista, orientalistica e primitivizzante del *'aruby* sia in patria sia all'estero (p. 22)? Siamo certi che la mascolinità e la virilità che questi migranti incarnano e perseguono sia innanzitutto una risposta alla situazione che fronteggiano quotidianamente in emigrazione e alle narrative locali che li riguardano (p. 102)? In assenza di emarginazione sociale e razzismo, non avrebbero adottato gli stessi comportamenti?

Non potrebbe più semplicemente trattarsi di rituali legati solo alla sfera del ricordo, della nostalgia, del divertimento? Oppure di performances identitarie, permanenza di tradizioni interpretabili come “resistenza all'assimilazione”? Riunirsi per ascoltare musica del proprio paese, così come mangiare couscous,

indossare babbucce e *jellaba*, pregare e osservare il Ramadan: cercare di mantenere la propria identità facendo le stesse cose che si farebbero in Marocco?

Sappiamo che tra i giovani mediorientali nel Mashreq va di moda rappresentarsi sui *social media* mentre si balla insieme musica araba con movenze orientali tradizionali e che tra i giovani marocchini i contenuti caricati sui *social media* sono accompagnati da musica *sha'bi*. Potrebbe trattarsi di un fenomeno analogo non correlato all'esperienza d'emigrazione? È difficile dare una risposta assertiva in campo squisitamente interpretativo.

Ma che dire allora della musica di protesta e denuncia delle condizioni di vita in emigrazione (vedi il rap e trap di Ghali, Baby Gang, o di francofoni come Younès Boucif, Soolking)?

Sovente, poi, nel mondo arabo-islamico la resistenza e la reazione politica assumono forme religiose, piuttosto che "arabe tradizionali". In questo studio la dimensione religiosa di questi uomini è taciuta, eppure sappiamo che abitudini e pratiche musicali di sufi, musulmani e islamici (*islamiyyun*: simpatizzanti e adepti dei movimenti moderati islamici) sono diversissime; ad esempio dovrebbe essere noto che la maggioranza dei musulmani zelanti e degli islamici (che non rappresentano una minoranza) tende a evitare la musica "profana", compresa quella *sha'bi* (pp. 152-153).

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RECENSIONI

Gabriella D'AGOSTINO, Vincenzo MATERA, a cura di | *Storie dell'antropologia*, Milano, UTET, 2022, pp. 635.

Si può affermare che una delle caratteristiche centrali dell'antropologia sia la sua diversità. Il termine è stato coniato da Gustavo Lins Ribeiro e Arturo Escobar nell'introduzione a un libro ormai classico, *World Anthropologies* (Routledge, 2006), che i curatori di *Storie dell'antropologia*, Gabriella D'Agostino e Vincenzo Matera, citano diverse volte nella loro introduzione. Questo concetto si riferisce alla "tensione creativa tra l'antropologia intesa, da una parte, come universale e, dall'altra, come molteplicità" (Ribeiro e Escobar, "Antropologie del mondo", *Anuac*, 1, 2018: 12).

Partirei da questo punto per offrire la mia personale lettura a un libro complesso, eterogeneo e sicuramente necessario. Complesso perché mostra le intricate storie di una disciplina che è costitutivamente plurale, sia come temi che come tradizioni nazionali; eterogeneo perché le autrici e gli autori del volume introducono chi legge all'interno di geografie e contesti sociali, politici e culturali compositi mostrandone le storie, le pratiche e le declinazioni nazionali; necessario, infine, perché, come mostrano gli stessi curatori, *Storie dell'antropologia* rappresenta, finora, un *unicum* nel panorama italiano. Aggiungerei, inoltre, che si colloca sicuramente in sincronia con un interesse sempre più crescente per una storia delle storie delle antropologie nazionali e delle loro relazioni. Mi riferisco, ad esempio, all'ambito iberoamericano, menzionando l'iniziativa editoriale della Asociación Latinoamericana de Antropología che ha cominciato a pubblicare una serie di volumi intitolata *Antropologías hechas en América Latina y el Caribe* con il proposito di costruirne le genealogie, gli apporti teorico-metodologici e pratici con il fine di "ri-conoscerci reciprocamente e cercare i punti di convergenza e le preoccupazioni che ci uniscono o ci differenziano" (<https://asociacionlatinoamericanadeantropologia.org/>).



pologia.net/portal/coleccion-antropologias-hechas-en-america-latina/). Nel 2023, inoltre, con la direzione generale di Lins Ribeiro, sono stati pubblicati due tomi intitolati *Panoramas de las antropologías mundiales* che raccolgono saggi tradotti in spagnolo e precedentemente pubblicati in inglese nell'*International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Insomma, *Storie dell'antropologia* si pone senza dubbio nel solco di una riflessione antropologica sulla disciplina a scala globale.

Il libro si compone di 21 capitoli a cui si aggiunge un'introduzione che contestualizza il progetto e riflette su alcune delle prospettive contemporanee che, secondo i curatori, hanno maggiormente impattato su una disciplina in continua tensione creativa rispetto alla propria posizionalità e ai propri (s)oggetti di studio. Concretamente, si tratta di nozioni come *postcolonia*, *restituzione* e *svolta ontologica*, lette all'interno di un'attenta riflessione sulla proposta delle *World Anthropologies*. Tematiche come queste attraversano, con maggiore o minore intensità, le riflessioni dei saggi presenti nel libro, ricostruendo un quadro senza dubbio sfaccettato di molte tradizioni nazionali. I capitoli si concentrano sui casi britannico (Rimoldi, Gardini), francese (Aria), dei Paesi di lingua tedesca (Bassi), italiano (Dei), spagnolo (García Castaño, Rubio Gómez, Calabresi), portoghese (Saraiva, Pussetti, Pozzi), scandinavo (Ligi), sovietico e poi russo (Scarduelli), dell'Africa occidentale francofona (Bellagamba), sudafricano (Allovio), nordamericana (Biscaldi; Palumbo), brasiliano (Ribeiro Corossacz), colombiano (Mancuso), messicano (Lupo), indiano (Roncaglia), vietnamita (Bougleux), australiano e del Pacifico occidentale (Tamisari, Di Rosa), dell'Oceania insulare (Favole), cinese (Malighetti) e dei Paesi arabi (Maffi). D'Agostino e Matera hanno scelto di non suddividere l'opera in parti, né di organizzare il libro per aree culturali, continenti o per categorie come antropologie del sud, periferiche o "da costruzione della nazione" e "dell'impero". Questa decisione elimina, giustamente, la possibilità di una gerarchizzazione delle diverse tradizioni che, tuttavia, sono figlie di complesse dinamiche di potere e asimmetria coloniale, tematiche trattate in tutti i capitoli.

Considerata l'opera – di oltre 600 pagine – mi è impossibile fornire un resoconto dettagliato di tutti i capitoli che, peraltro, non si configurano metodologicamente come mere variazioni su un tema, ma hanno il pregio di un'autonomia teorica e storica che, tuttavia, appare ben amalgamata nel volume. Per questa ragione, mi soffermerò su alcuni tratti trasversali. Per cominciare, emerge nei diversi capitoli l'impossibilità di scrivere *una* storia dell'antropologia di un determinato contesto. Tutti gli autori e le autrici

fanno luce su coloro che praticano la disciplina, sugli attori istituzionali, le riviste e il contesto nazionale in cui sono emerse e si sono sviluppate le diverse tradizioni antropologiche, spesso ricorrendo a periodizzazioni utili per inquadrarne l'evoluzione. Questo tipo di lettura si rivela centrale poiché permette di contestualizzare le complesse dinamiche di sviluppo, le tensioni interne e gli apporti esterni provenienti sia dalla stessa disciplina – ma da contesti nazionali diversi – che da discipline vicine. A questo proposito, molti dei capitoli discutono le contaminazioni e i punti di incontro con discipline come la sociologia (Aria sulla Francia, Roncaglia sull'India), la storia (Lupo sul Messico) o l'archeologia (Bougleux sul Vietnam), sia da un punto di vista teorico-metodologico che di convergenze paradigmatiche. Un altro tema trasversale è quello dei contributi cruciali alla disciplina da parte delle antropologhe, come nei casi del Sudafrica (Allovio) e dell'India (Roncaglia).

Gli autori e le autrici affrontano le storie nazionali connettendole agli sviluppi dei diversi paradigmi antropologici letti, recepiti e adattati a livello contestuale e, spesso, per influsso di praticanti stranieri o locali che avevano studiato all'estero. In questo senso, la dimensione transnazionale della disciplina ma, soprattutto, dei suoi praticanti, è un tema ricorrente nei saggi di *Storie dell'antropologia*, così come lo è la riflessione sul colonialismo, l'eredità postcoloniale e il razzismo (Ribeiro Corossacz sul Brasile).

Ad esempio, richiama l'attenzione quanto emerge in diversi capitoli che si concentrano su tradizioni nazionali di Stati postcoloniali rispetto allo *status* dell'antropologia come sapere spesso percepito come inutile allo sviluppo, da una parte e, dall'altra, come fortemente implicato con l'impresa coloniale. Ciononostante, una tale ambiguità ha incoraggiato in modi diversi e innovativi la riflessione epistemologica della disciplina, soprattutto in contesti postcoloniali, e spesso ad opera di antropologi e antropologhe native (Favole sull'Oceania insulare).

Alcuni dei capitoli riflettono, inoltre, sulla dimensione traduttologica e linguistica dell'antropologia, un aspetto centrale nell'economia della disseminazione delle ricerche, nella possibilità di raggiungere un pubblico più vasto rispetto a quello nazionale e per democratizzare la conoscenza, un insieme di questioni specialmente messe in luce per il caso dell'Italia (Dei) e, declinato in chiave di antropologia applicata – questo un altro tema affrontato nei diversi capitoli – per quanto riguarda i Paesi scandinavi (Ligi).

Se non lo si fosse già fatto, pubblicando una versione inglese (*Histories of Anthropology*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), avrei sicuramente consigliato di

tradurre *Storie dell'antropologia*. Nel complesso, si tratta di un libro indispensabile per avere un panorama dell'antropologia che, finalmente, non si limiti a ricostruire solo le grandi tradizioni egemoniche e le biografie intellettuali dei "grandi maestri", ma che, come fa *Storie dell'Antropologia*, permetta a chi la pratica di avere una visione d'insieme anche di quelle tradizioni poco o per nulla conosciute fuori dai confini nazionali, a meno di essere specialisti di una determinata area. Certo, sarebbe stato impossibile includere tutte le tradizioni nazionali, e i curatori motivano le difficoltà oggettive di trovare referenti, nonché le defezioni arrivate "fuori tempo massimo" (p. 14) per sostituirli. Tuttavia, sarebbe stato interessante includere altre tradizioni significative, come quella giapponese, peruviana, argentina, cilena o dei paesi slavi, cosa che avrebbe ulteriormente arricchito il panorama antropologico proposto.

In conclusione, D'Agostino e Matera, insieme alle autrici e gli autori che hanno partecipato al libro, restituiscono a chi legge una storia plurale delle antropologie del mondo, un'autorevole punto di partenza per una serie di progetti futuri che, si auspica, possano continuare a esplorare una delle caratteristiche più salienti dell'antropologia: la diversalità.

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RECENSIONI

Serena OLCUIRE | *Indecorose. Sex work e resistenza al governo dello spazio pubblico nella città di Roma*, Verona, ombre corte, 2023, pp. 236.

In Italia, come è stato spesso osservato, l'antropologia e l'etnografia di genere e femminista non trovano granché spazio nei manuali di storia della disciplina. L'esito di questa assenza si traduce spesso nella reificazione di un tacito pensiero di fondo per cui l'antropologia di genere parli sempre e solo *delle* donne, non considerando la costruzione e la performatività del genere come questioni primarie nell'analisi delle società. Per ogni antropologa desiderosa di risignificare questo rapporto, arriva un momento in cui si realizza di dover intraprendere un percorso tendenzialmente da autodidatta, tanto sul piano teorico quanto metodologico, al quale molto spesso si reagisce provando a rompere l'isolamento e trovare conforto analitico ed epistemologico anche in altre discipline.

Il libro di Serena Olcuire *Indecorose. Sex work e resistenza al governo dello spazio pubblico nella città di Roma* svolge perfettamente questo ruolo. Lo fa dalla prospettiva degli studi urbani, con un background da architetta, ma attraversando i più disparati campi disciplinari e metodologici. Nel ripercorrere assieme all'autrice tutti i casi romani analizzati, assieme a tutte le tematiche che questi ultimi sollecitano, si scorge sempre nitidamente un *leitmotiv*: quello di considerare il sex work di strada uno stimolo per una riflessione più ampia sulla dimensione di genere nello spazio urbano. Così facendo, il lavoro sessuale nello spazio pubblico finisce per interrogare pianificazione urbanistica e comunità accademica non solo su una particolare estensione della sessualità fuori dagli spazi domestici, ma anche sull'esplicitazione del disagio che emerge nel rapporto con ciò che viene egemonicamente definito come un'alterità e la sua pratica, e che Olcuire tratta come una questione di convivenza.

Il volume dedica ampio spazio a questa configurazione: dalla legge Merlin al decreto Minniti (o Daspo urbano), ciò che ne emerge è un quadro complesso di come la presenza delle sex worker sconvolga periodicamente le geografie morali della città, confondendo la dicotomia tra pubblico e privato (e tra che cosa è considerato un comportamento lecito e “decoroso” nei rispettivi ambiti). La prostituzione di strada viene quindi affrontata anche alla luce dei numerosi profili semantici in cui è stata collocata nel corso dei decenni, ognuno corrispondente a una precisa scelta in termini spaziali: da problema di salute pubblica negli anni Cinquanta, passando per l’identificazione del fenomeno in sé sempre e comunque nei termini di tratta degli esseri umani (tuttora attuale), fino ad arrivare all’ulteriore e corrente configurazione tutta improntata sull’equiparazione dei termini “sicurezza” e “decoro”. A tale proposito, Olcuire parla dettagliatamente del già citato Daspo urbano del 2017 e di come, attraverso questo, si sia passati da un’idea di *security* (intesa come benessere sociale, esistenziale e materiale) a un’egemonia della *safety*, dunque di integrità fisica e patrimoniale. Ne emerge una interessante conformazione locale di quello che Comaroff definì *lawfare* (“Colonialism, Culture, and the Law: A Foreword”, *Law & Social Inquiry*, 2001) e che qui potremmo provare a declinare come *decorumfare*. Se con il primo termine si intende solitamente una progressiva espansione nei sistemi democratici della legittimazione della legge in quanto tale, che espande il potere giudiziario a discapito di altri e ingabbia le pratiche quotidiane in formalismi esasperati, nei casi qui presentati sembra di assistere allo stesso fenomeno, ma all’insegna di una legittimazione a prescindere di ciò che è considerato accettabile e decoroso e di un costante disciplinamento amministrativo del “conturbante” nello spazio pubblico, pena la messa a repentaglio della propria o altrui incolumità. L’autrice propone di contro una lettura dichiaratamente decertauiana della reazione delle sex worker a simili dispositivi, rivendicandone l’agentività e la loro capacità di mettere in pratica atti di resistenza mediante i quali non solo i vincoli dell’ordine sociale vengono elusi, ma ne deriva un uso imprevedibile dello spazio attraversato, generando attività e modi di fare creativi e innovativi.

Se è vero infatti che lo spazio pubblico non nasce come ontologicamente inclusivo, ma può anzi divenire luogo di esclusione, è altrettanto vero che questo rappresenta uno spazio costantemente attraversato, conflittuale e relazionale. È il caso di Paulette (capitolo primo), sex worker trans colombiana, e della sua storia fatta tanto di violenza quanto di reti di solidarietà e relazioni. È il caso della borgata storica romana del Quarticciolo e della sua *favela* (ca-

pitolo quinto), due edifici di edilizia residenziale pubblica abitati da diverse sex worker e che Olcuire ha etnografato e analizzato come un sistema multivocale, interagendo anche con i vicini e le vicine di casa e restituendo una quotidianità fatta di piccole negoziazioni finalizzate al raggiungimento della coesistenza. In quest'ultimo caso, l'autrice ha poi modo e merito di inserire nella sua analisi intersezionale la dimensione di classe, mostrando come il "ceto" del quartiere, soprattutto in una città stratificata e diseguale come Roma, determini spesso anche il tipo di conflitto che il fenomeno del sex work può innescare. Discorso diverso per quanto riguarda il tentativo (fallito) di *zoning* nel quartiere di Tor Sapienza (capitolo quarto), che se da un lato ha visto il tentativo da parte di comitati e istituzioni locali di trovare una soluzione al problema della convivenza con le sex worker attraverso la mediazione, dall'altra ha escluso queste ultime dal processo negoziale e implicitamente proposto un'idea di città come sommatoria di parti distinte e monofunzionali.

Ancora una volta, nonostante la diversità dei vari casi e contesti, a emergere con forza è l'impossibilità di guardare al sex work senza affrontare questioni legate alla complessità delle dinamiche urbane in senso più ampio. "Il diritto all'abitare, la gestione della marginalità, i diversi approcci di intervento sulle periferie sono temi che si impongono e intrecciano non appena si decostruisce lo stigma legato all'attività delle sex worker e le si considera nel ruolo di abitanti", scrive a tale proposito l'autrice (p. 171). Ma prima ancora di giungere alla scala del quartiere o della città, in ognuno di questi casi il corpo "indecoroso" emerge come primo luogo di contesa sociale, politica e spaziale, spingendoci a spostare l'attenzione dal modo in cui il genere è costruito a come si esprime nello spazio.

Olcuire sollecita dunque, nel capitolo conclusivo, la stessa pianificazione urbanistica all'interno della quale si è formata come studiosa, una disciplina da sempre impegnata nel costruire urbanità attorno alla figura "media" del cittadino maschio, cis, etero, occidentale e lavoratore, etichettando tutto ciò che non rispecchi questo modello come alterità e differenza. L'invito, ancora una volta, diviene allora quello di considerare il sex work un paradigma del problema della convivenza con la diversità nello spazio urbano, abbandonando quel *decorumfare* precedentemente accennato che vede nella città non la spazializzazione delle sue negoziazioni per la coesistenza, quanto lo specchio dell'egemonia di un'unica soggettività che si autoproclama più legittimata di altre a definire quali usi, pratiche e persino presenze siano da considerare accettabili e quali no.

Non si tratta di romanticizzare gli spazi di marginalità, quanto di ribadire che gli atti di “riempimento”, appropriazione e uso di questi ultimi sono atti politici a cui è imperativo guardare quando si intende scrivere o parlare di giustizia sociale. Per dirla (e per concludere) con le parole della stessa Paulette: “Gli spazi vuoti li riempiamo noi!” (p. 47).

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RECENSIONI

Denise PETTINATO | *Etnografia al bancone. Spazi, corpi, oggetti nelle pratiche del bar*, Postfazione di Pietro Meloni, Pisa, Pacini, 2022, pp. 231.

Lo scoppio della pandemia e le restrizioni che ne seguirono, gettarono nelle ambascie quei ricercatori che avevano progettato di svolgere (se non già iniziato) una ricerca etnografica. Se i ricercatori strutturati poterono rimandare, più preoccupati furono forse i laureandi e i dottorandi che si trovarono prigionieri tra la necessità di doversi diplomare entro termini più o meno fissi e l'impossibilità di andare "sul campo". Apparve chiaro come questo "campo" fosse proprio una metafora infelice perché esso non deve mai essere "disabitato"; si prese coscienza di quanto la ricerca etnografica si basi su un ovvio dato sempre per scontato: la prossimità con altre persone, l'incontro ravvicinato. Togli l'incontro e scompare l'etnografia. Antropologie *at a distance* sono state tentate fin dagli anni Quaranta del secolo scorso, ma in quei casi mancava l'esperienza con le persone descritte e ci si avvaleva pressoché solamente di testi scritti da altri. Ora, al tempo del Covid, gli studenti erano i più motivati per trovare soluzioni all'impasse in cui una congiura globalizzata li aveva gettati. Se, come credo (ma sarebbe interessante un'indagine mirata), molti cambiarono all'ultimo il progetto di tesi, alcuni perseverarono proponendo nuove vie o quasi, o aggiornando modalità che erano rimaste marginali nello spettro che chiamiamo "ricerca etnografica". Per quello che mi risulta, la ricerca via *social network* (interviste on line, questionari, focus group, gruppi di chat, ecc.) e/o l'etnografia dei/nei *social* stessi sono state ampiamente prescelte. Il tipo di incontro etnografico che queste modalità permettono è oggetto, come noto, di interpretazioni contrastanti. Ma non è questo il luogo per parlarne, perché non è la via maestra scelta da Denise Pettinato, che qui ci interessa.

Studente-lavoratrice, dal 2016 al 2019 Pettinato fa la barista in un locale di Macerata, poi, fino al lockdown del 2020, in un bar del centro a Siena e in una



discoteca. Prigioniera della quarantena, l'esperienza lavorativa le suggerisce di intraprendere uno studio di "etnografia retrospettiva" su quei bar per la sua tesi di laurea magistrale. Per lungimiranza dei suoi tutor, presumo, quella tesi è ora il volume n. 23 della collana "Percorsi di antropologia e cultura popolare" diretta da Pietro Clemente presso l'editore Pacini. L'etnografia retrospettiva, cioè la descrizione etnografica di un'esperienza svolta prima di aver acquisito una formazione antropologica, ha accompagnato fin dagli inizi la storia dell'etnografia novecentesca, basti pensare a *The hobo* di Nels Anderson pubblicato nel 1923 (The University of Chicago Press, 1961), ma è rimasta una modalità marginale e poco seguita, se non nella variante della cosiddetta "etnografia in situazione" (ricerca in contesto che si frequentava e si continua a frequentare senza interruzione prima e durante l'impegno etnografico). L'autrice sposa totalmente l'etnografia retrospettiva, introducendovi delle innovazioni che rendono il suo libro un'autentica sperimentazione sia sul lato della ricerca che su quello della resa testuale. Da brava etnografa, posiziona come focus della descrizione il bar di Macerata che ha frequentato molto più a lungo, lasciando il bar e la discoteca di Siena come una sorta di "istanze di controllo" per rimarcare somiglianze e differenze; la stessa funzione hanno gli episodici ritorni a Macerata, che le permettono il confronto tra la vita del bar prima e mentre sono in vigore le normative anti-Covid. Ovviamente la memoria personale è lo strumento principale, ma la ricercatrice si avvale anche dell'aiuto di "bigliettini" che un tempo scriveva al lavoro quando pensava di utilizzarli per delle composizioni letterarie, pezzi di carta e tovagliolini che si trovano rifunzionalizzati come appunti etnografici; così come effettua, da etnografa, nuovi colloqui in presenza o via chat con ex-colleghi di lavoro e clienti – il che rende l'etnografia apertamente collaborativa. Ma nel rammemorare la vita dalla sua posizione dietro il bancone usa un particolare metodo che funge quasi da sua *madeleine* proustiana, il *tactile collage*, in cui più che l'olfatto sono appunto il tatto e soprattutto la vista a indirizzare il ricordo. Su mappe disegnate dall'autrice e raffiguranti le diverse parti del bar vengono incollati ritagli con immagini di oggetti che forzano l'evocazione: "tutte infatti appartengono ai cataloghi dei fornitori (per quanto riguarda le bottiglie di vino, le bevande, le marche di alcolici) o a quelli di arredamento utilizzati dai titolari [...] Le immagini dei ritagli finiscono così per coincidere con le cose realmente presenti al bar" (p. 53).

Le pagine sono "ornate" di tante immagini di questi collage evocativo-descrittivi, ma non sono le uniche caratteristiche del libro. Esso è infatti multitestuale nel senso che, oltre al testo principale con le sue note a piè di

pagina (poche), oltre alle figure che riportano i collage o foto, oltre a qualche tabella, sono presenti anche quattordici “quadri”. Pur graficamente incorniciati, non sono altre immagini, ma testi composti al di fuori della narrazione principale, dalla quale però si dipartono come approfondimento di un tema, di un oggetto, di un ambiente, di un personaggio, di una relazione.

È con questi ausili applicati alla sua esperienza pre-etnografica che l'autrice ci fornisce una ricerca esemplare, dove si incrociano amalgamate con maestria etnografia retrospettiva, auto-etnografia e micro-etnografia alla Goffman (un autore qui ben utilizzato). Specie del Piranha, il bar di Macerata, veniamo a conoscere lo staff, i tipi di clienti, quelli abitudinari e quelli meno, il loro uso degli spazi, gli abitanti dell'immobile in cui si trova, il quartiere, gli ex-frequentatori che restano amici pur da lontano. Il bar è senz'altro un luogo di passaggio per i clienti (p. 79), ma per fortuna l'autrice non cade nel tranello alla moda di farne l'ennesimo “non-luogo”, tutt'altro! Un capitolo denso è riservato ai tanti tipi di oggetti presenti nel bar, che lo caratterizzano, che caratterizzano la sua storia, quella di chi ci lavora e quella dei clienti. Altrettanto densa è la parte in cui vengono descritti i gesti della barista dietro il bancone nella sua routine quotidiana o nei momenti di maggior afflusso, come quello dell'*happy hour*, barista che, ora etnografa, si trova a rievocarli e analizzarli con finezza: quasi vediamo i gesti incorporati che le escono frenetici ma spontanei al momento dell'urgenza e del bisogno, ma che li capisci goffi in un nuovo bar dalla disposizione diversa dell'arredo e degli oggetti. O nello stesso bar Piranha, i cui spazi sono divenuti quasi irriconoscibili dopo l'applicazione delle direttive anti-Covid.

La ricerca di Pettinato ha poco o nulla dell'“etnografia dei mestieri” di un tempo; l'autrice stessa la inserisce, come sottolinea Pietro Meloni nella Postfazione, nell'ambito degli studi di cultura materiale. I lettori ci scopriranno ben allacciati tra loro diversi altri ambiti. Come quello da retroscena teatrale, quando in un duetto con una collega la barista imita la cliente insopportabile, e finge di ordinare (p. 132): “Un caffè deca macchiato con il latte di soia, né caldo né freddo, tiepido... in vetro”. E la collega di rimando: “Guardi, signora, c'è un altro bar in fondo alla strada, se vuole andare lì, a me mi fa solo un piacere!”. Al lettore che abbia pregressa esperienza di lavoro nella ristorazione l'etnografa dà l'occasione di rievocare quanto volentieri egli stesso avrebbe davvero mandato a quel paese quel tipo di cliente!

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RECENSIONI

Antonello Ricci | *Sguardi lontani. Fotografia ed etnografia nella prima metà del Novecento. Con immagini di Franz Boas, Bronislaw Malinowski, Marcel Griaule, Renato Boccassino, Lamberto Loria e Raffaele Corso, Gregory Bateson e Margaret Mead*, Milano, Franco Angeli, 2023, pp. 237.

Il volume raccoglie una serie di saggi in gran parte già pubblicati tra il 2004 e il 2021, che affrontano con taglio eminentemente didattico le figure di alcuni grandi antropologi impegnati durante la prima metà del Novecento nello sviluppo di metodologie di ricerca visiva basate, in particolare, sull'uso della fotografia. Ai testi si aggiunge una corposa sezione iconografica che presenta 85 immagini di repertorio relative alle ricerche etnovisive degli autori o dei loro collaboratori.

Il primo capitolo è dedicato a Franz Boas e si concentra sul suo rapporto con George Hunt, interprete, collaboratore e “mediatore interculturale” di madre tlingit e padre inglese, considerato uno dei primi etnologi nativi dell'area. Si trattò di una collaborazione lunga e reciprocamente arricchente. Ai primi del Novecento Boas aveva donato a Hunt un apparecchio fotografico grazie al quale poté familiarizzarsi con questo medium, utilizzandolo nel corso della sua vita professionale. L'adozione della fotografia come metodo di ricerca era del tutto coerente con gli interessi di Boas (e anche di Hunt) per l'arte figurativa, decorativa e architettonica. Questo approccio venne messo a frutto in occasione della Fiera Mondiale Colombiana inaugurata a Chicago nel 1893. Boas era stato incaricato di progettare il laboratorio di antropometria e di lavorare all'organizzazione dell'area etnologica presente in Fiera, dove venne edificato un “villaggio etnico” con due case lunghe kwakiutl abitate da 17 persone originarie della Columbia britannica. Riprendendo l'analisi di Ira Jackins (in *Objects and Others*, a cura di G.W. Stocking, Wisconsin University Press, 1985), Ricci sottolinea quanto la committenza museale divenne fondamentale nelle ricerche di Boas, stimolando la raccolta di documenti visivi realizzati con finalità divulgative, spesso coadiuvata da fotografi professionisti.

Il secondo capitolo offre spunti di analisi dell'“etnografia visiva” di Bronislaw Malinowski relativa alla società trobriandese. Come è ben noto, egli utilizzò sistematicamente l'apparecchio fotografico con competenza tecnica, senza tuttavia elaborare un'esplicita teoria relativa al suo utilizzo nella ricerca. Come lui stesso ammette in un brano dei taccuini citato nel volume, la fotografia era per lui una sorta di raccolta di curiosità, attività accessoria di “rilassamento” dal lavoro di campo. La sezione iconografica riporta in effetti una quindicina di scatti dell'antropologo polacco che sarebbe stato interessante analizzare nei loro contenuti semantici e stilistici. Tuttavia, l'affermazione di un presunto “istinto visuale” di Malinowski (p. 53) sembrerebbe invece voler suggerire una concezione spontaneistica della fotografia, opposta all'idea che le immagini siano rappresentazioni costruite articolando specifici linguaggi visivi.

Il terzo capitolo affronta la produzione visiva di Marcel Griaule, realizzata negli anni Trenta nel corso di diverse spedizioni nella regione del Sahel africano. Ricci ricostruisce il metodo di lavoro utilizzato da Griaule e dai suoi compagni, in particolare dai membri della spedizione Dakar-Gibuti tra cui Michel Leiris. Anche per Griaule le finalità museali – l'impegno ad arricchire le collezioni dell'allora Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadero - determina lo stile delle rappresentazioni visive, mirate in primo luogo a illustrare il contesto di origine degli oggetti. Ricci sottolinea la dimensione divulgativa delle immagini scattate nel corso delle ricerche successive, in gran parte relative ai Dogon. Griaule utilizzò in questo contesto anche il cinematografo, illustrando così riti e cerimonie funebri con uno stile distaccato ed esotizzante. Nonostante ciò, come giustamente osserva Ricci, l'opera di Griaule rappresenta comunque un momento rilevante per l'antropologia visiva, che aprì il campo al lavoro del discepolo Jean Rouch.

I due capitoli successivi sono dedicati alle produzioni visive di alcuni antropologi italiani: Renato Boccassino, Lamberto Loria e Raffaele Corso. Boccassino fu allievo di Malinowski e di Charles Gabriel Seligman alla London School of Economics, e da quest'ultimo incoraggiato a intraprendere ricerche sul terreno in Africa orientale, dove si concentrarono altri antropologi italiani legati come lui all'ambiente cattolico (Joseph Crazzolaro, Bernardo Bernardi, Vittorio Maconi). Tra il 1933 e il 1934 Boccassino si recò tra gli Acholi dell'Uganda settentrionale, gruppo di lingua nilotica dal caratteristico sistema politico acefalo. Il rigoroso metodo etnografico adottato da Boccassino comprendeva un uso sistematico della fotografia e anche della registrazione sonora (di cui

sono sopravvissute solo poche testimonianze). La riscoperta di questo autore e dei materiali visivi da lui raccolti presso gli Acholi ha consentito di far riemergere una documentazione preziosa, vista la scarsità di fonti storiche sull'area.

Al contrario, la figura di Lamberto Loria è ben conosciuta sia per quel che riguarda le sue spedizioni extraeuropee sia, e forse soprattutto, per l'organizzazione nel 1911 della Mostra di Etnografia Italiana di Roma nell'ambito delle Celebrazioni del Cinquantenario dell'Unità d'Italia. In questa occasione Loria si avvale della collaborazione di Raffaele Corso per l'allestimento del padiglione calabrese, cui Corso contribuì fornendo un corpus di fotografie realizzate personalmente o attraverso l'ausilio di fotografi professionisti. Come nei capitoli precedenti, anche in questo caso l'attenzione di Ricci si concentra sul metodo etnografico elaborato dai due antropologi italiani, basato su una attenta schedatura di oggetti e fenomeni culturali, finalizzata a costruire quelli che oggi definiamo "beni demoetnoantropologici" da esporre e conservare nei musei etnografici. Le fotografie, in questo progetto, costituiscono elementi utili a contestualizzare gli oggetti reinserendoli in una dimensione di vita vissuta.

L'ultimo capitolo è dedicato all'antropologia visiva di Gregory Bateson e Margaret Mead, scaturita da un momento particolarmente fecondo del loro sodalizio umano e intellettuale. In Nuova Guinea e a Bali, la coppia sperimenta notoriamente un utilizzo innovativo delle immagini per la ricerca antropologica affidandovi non solo il compito di catturare frammenti di comportamenti in grado di esprimere il "retrotterra emotivo" (*ethos*) delle culture studiate, ma anche quello di restituire al pubblico le loro interpretazioni attraverso un discorso eminentemente visivo. Un esperimento concretizzatosi nella pubblicazione del volume fotografico *A Balinese Character* (New York Academy of Sciences, 1942), che costituisce uno dei primi e più efficaci esempi di "antropologia multimodale" *ante litteram*.

Nel dialogo dei due antropologi, citato in chiusura del capitolo, emerge un concetto chiave che avrebbe forse meritato una più ampia trattazione. Bateson dichiara che la fotografia è, a suo parere, una forma d'arte, mentre Mead sostiene che il suo uso scientifico non debba "alterare" la realtà. La storia dell'antropologia visiva si è dibattuta per decenni su questo dilemma, propendendo a lungo per una concezione della fotografia intesa come documento oggettivo della realtà. Nell'introduzione si accenna al tema, ripercorrendo le "sei strade di ricerca" degli autori trattati nel volume, aggiungendo qualche ri-

chiamo ad altri sguardi antropologici e in particolare alle fotografie realizzate da Claude Lévi-Strauss in Brasile. La posizione di Lévi-Strauss a proposito di questo tema è chiara e radicale: con il suo tipico acume egli coglie la natura profonda del mezzo fotografico (e cinematografico), che risiede precisamente nel saper presentare o raccontare ciò che l'occhio non vede. Detto altrimenti, il linguaggio fotografico non ha di fatto la possibilità di produrre documentazioni "oggettive" di una qualunque realtà, essendo necessariamente fondato sulla relazione tra un soggetto impegnato ad adottare molteplici scelte compositive e l'oggetto della rappresentazione. Il realismo in fotografia può essere garantito unicamente dalla natura indessicale del mezzo, che conserva memoria della contiguità spaziale intercorrente tra l'apparecchio e la scena fotografata.

Il volume è una densa "cavalcata" tra le etnografie visive di importanti antropologi e fornisce interessanti spunti di riflessione. Peccato che, coerentemente con questa impostazione, le numerose immagini riprodotte nell'appendice non siano state sfruttate per illustrare le metodologie descritte nei diversi capitoli. Sarebbe stato interessante guidare studenti e lettori in una analisi puntuale delle fotografie, ricostruendo il contesto e l'occasione di ciascuno scatto, decodificando l'articolazione del "discorso" visivo in esse contenuto e delle scelte compositive e semantiche operate dagli autori, così da cogliere attraverso le immagini la loro personale interpretazione di quelle realtà etnografiche.

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RECENSIONI

Kohei SAITO | *Marx in the Anthropocene. Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism*, Cambridge UK, Cambridge University Press, 2022, pp. 276.

Un caso davvero curioso quello di Kohei Saito. Con la sua ponderosa tesi di dottorato, *Karl Marx's Ecosocialism* (questo il titolo dell'edizione inglese, Monthly Review Press, 2017), è riuscito a conquistare gli accademici del prestigioso *Isaac Deutscher Memorial Prize*. Dopodiché, ha convinto oltre 500.000 lettori giapponesi ad acquistare *Il capitale nell'era dell'Antropocene* (人新世の「資本論」, *Hitoshinsei no Shihonron*, Shueisha, 2020) – un successo impensabile alle nostre latitudini per un saggio di tal genere.

Questo terzo volume, pubblicato nel 2022, approfondisce l'opera di scavo sui nuovi quaderni marxiani disponibili dal 2012 nei MEGA (*Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe*, Sezioni I-IV) e stabilisce un confronto serrato con la letteratura marxista classica nonché, soprattutto, con quella contemporanea di taglio eco-socialista.

L'ipotesi forte di Saito è che gli studi e gli scritti prodotti da Marx nei suoi ultimi quindici anni di vita, ossia dopo la pubblicazione del primo libro de *Il Capitale* (1867), ancorché frammentari, testimonino di una vera e propria svolta epistemologica che ridefinisce il senso complessivo del pensiero marxiano. Circa un terzo degli appunti di questo periodo riguarda le scienze naturali e, unito alle considerazioni disseminate in maniera rapsodica nei tre volumi de *Il Capitale*, costituisce il corpus di una critica ecologica del capitalismo alla luce della quale va reinterpretata la sua tradizionale critica dell'economia politica.

Saito affranca Marx da quello spirito prometeico, produttivista, tecno-ottimista che trova legittimazione nel suo “provvidenzialismo” di matrice hegeliana: quell'idea, vale a dire, secondo cui il capitalismo contiene al suo interno le contraddizioni che nel lungo periodo contribuiranno a trascender-



lo, regalandoci la liberazione; e che non c'è, dunque, nient'altro da fare se non indulgere alla traiettoria di sviluppo del capitale, in modo da accelerare la sua capitolazione (Nick Srnicek), grazie alla legge della caduta tendenziale del saggio di profitto. Al Marx dialettico, perso nell'incanto dell'*Aufhebung* (la promessa di superamento), Saito oppone un Marx tragico, che vede il capitalismo come una macchina di distruzione senza ritorno di quel sostrato materiale, la natura, non producibile dall'uomo ma solo trasformabile. Di fronte a questa consapevolezza, non è più possibile *surfare* sull'onda della Storia, ma occorre assumersi la responsabilità politica del cambiamento, ossia produrre una forma di società che, traendo ispirazione da movimenti premoderni (come quello delle comuni rurali Narodniks nella Russia zarista), accordi il metabolismo sociale al metabolismo della natura. L'utopia diventa, dunque, una retrotopia (senza quella connotazione negativa che Bauman attribuisce al termine).

Perché questo versante della riflessione di Marx è rimasto in ombra nello sviluppo del marxismo occidentale? Saito ne attribuisce la responsabilità primigenia a Engels che, com'è noto, ha curato la pubblicazione dei successivi due volumi de *Il Capitale* dopo la morte del sodale. A prescindere dalle sue idiosincrasie rispetto alla maniera in cui Marx andava declinando la questione ecologica, Engels ha cercato di preservare la funzionalità politica dell'apparato teorico marxiano alla lotta proletaria, glissando su temi che avrebbero incrinato la fiducia nelle magnifiche sorti e progressive. In più, Engels si era come assunto, dentro l'impresa intellettuale del duo, il monopolio delle scienze naturali. Questo ha provocato successivamente un approfondimento della rimozione: i marxisti occidentali, infatti, nel corso del Novecento butteranno via il bambino della riflessione sulla natura in seno al marxismo insieme all'acqua sporca del rozzo meccanicismo engelsiano in *Dialettica della natura* e ne *l'Anti-Dühring*. Le importanti suggestioni proposte da Rosa Luxemburg sullo sfruttamento delle risorse e delle formazioni pre-capitalistiche delle periferie e da György Lukács sulla teoria del metabolismo saranno derubricate come inopportune e incoerenti.

Occorrerà attendere il nuovo millennio per una prima messa a punto dell'ecologia marxista, soprattutto grazie ai lavori pionieristici del marxista ungherese István Mészáros (*Beyond Capital*, NYU Press, Monthly Review Press, 2010), nonché a quelli di Foster e Burkett, nel cenacolo della *Monthly Review*. La logica del capitale, abbandonando l'ancoraggio al valor d'uso, ossia ai bisogni finiti dei membri di una comunità concreta, per puntare al profitto illimitato, attraverso la produzione di valori di scambio e di appetiti artificia-

li, produce una “frattura metabolica”. Questa forma di mediazione alienata distrugge l’ordine primario rappresentato dal sostrato materiale su cui si fonda ogni trasformazione produttiva, ossia quel limite assoluto che il capitale tenta costantemente di relativizzare. La frattura metabolica ha una triplice manifestazione: innanzi tutto, l’incompatibilità con i processi ciclici del metabolismo naturale (si pensi all’impoverimento del suolo, cui Marx attribuisce grande rilevanza dopo aver letto le opere di Justus von Liebig); in secondo luogo, la frattura spaziale tra città (dove la concentrazione abitativa produce il degrado delle condizioni di vita) e campagna (che mettendosi al servizio dei centri urbani conosce un iper-sfruttamento distruttivo); in ultimo, la frattura temporale tra la velocità di accrescimento della produzione industriale attraverso le macchine e i processi riproduttivi delle risorse naturali che non possono mantenere ritmi corrispondenti. Il capitale fronteggia queste tre fratture metaboliche con altrettanti espedienti (*metabolic shifts*): quello tecnologico, innanzi tutto, ossia il tentativo di manipolare i processi biologici attraverso la tecnica (vedasi l’importazione del guano dall’America Latina per rifertilizzare i suoli europei); quello spaziale, che allarga continuamente l’antagonismo tra città e campagna fino all’attuale contrapposizione tra Nord e Sud globale; quello temporale, che carica le esternalità negative della produzione capitalistica sulle spalle delle future generazioni.

Rispetto alla questione metabolica, Saito guarda con preoccupazione all’egemonia che la visione monista (di cui Bruno Latour è il principale esponente) esprime anche nell’ambito dell’eco-marxismo: l’indistinzione tra società e natura, l’idea di “fine della natura” o di “produzione della natura” (Neil Smith) sono il viatico per il geo-costruttivismo, il tecno-ottimismo e, in generale, la prospettiva di un Antropocene “buono”. Jason Moore rifiuta, infatti, il concetto di frattura metabolica, denunciandolo come figlio del dualismo cartesiano: esseri umani e natura sono invece inestricabilmente intrecciati (*entangled*) e si co-producono costantemente. Egli preferisce, piuttosto, spostare l’attenzione sulla “seconda contraddizione del capitalismo”, ossia sulla circostanza che l’ipersfruttamento delle risorse naturali ne rende sempre più difficile l’approvvigionamento e sempre più alto il costo, determinando la fine della *cheap nature*. Il proletariato deprivato a causa della prima contraddizione del capitalismo (O’Connor) può quindi allearsi col “biotariato”, ossia la natura sfruttata – e dotata di *agency*, in ossequio al monismo latouriano – per condurre la lotta anti-capitalistica.

Saito, denunciando l’inconcludenza politica di questa prospettiva, che non lascia intravedere il funzionamento di una società post-capitalista, vi oppone

una concezione originale, quantunque ispirata a Lukács, che mette insieme il monismo ontologico (ossia il riconoscimento che l'uomo è, inequivocabilmente, "natura" e che, reciprocamente, la conoscenza della natura è sempre mediata dal discorso) con un dualismo metodologico e analitico, grazie al quale egli riconosce che i processi naturali sono indipendenti dall'attività umana (il ghiaccio fonde sempre alla stessa temperatura, a prescindere dalle nostre azioni) e che solo gli esseri umani possono agire consapevolmente per porre rimedio alla frattura metabolica attraverso un altro tipo di organizzazione del metabolismo con la natura.

È chiaro, tuttavia, che l'eco-modernismo, la geo-ingegneria, il tecno-ottimismo dei comunisti accelerazionisti (Srnicek) e automatisti (Aaron Bastani) nonché l'inconcludenza politica degli eco-marxisti non siano solo frutto del monismo epistemologico, ma anche della persistente idea provvidenzialista che viene costantemente ri-declinata, come nel caso emblematico del "biotariato".

Occorre allora insistere sull'idea benjaminiana, evocata da Saito, della rivoluzione come "freno" della storia e dedicarsi a esplorare le condizioni di possibilità per la costruzione di un comunismo decrescitista. L'argomento razionale per una simile trasformazione (la necessità del ripristino di un metabolismo equilibrato tra società e natura) è solido, ma forse non auto-sufficiente. Sarà imprescindibile la ricerca di un'eccedenza simbolica nonché una profonda tematizzazione della questione antropologica. La pista da seguire resta quella indicata da Marx sulla libertà come affrancamento dal regno della necessità. Georges Bataille ha proposto uno sviluppo. Ma il cammino è solo all'inizio.

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RECENSIONI

Francesco SCOTTI | *Per una storia della riforma psichiatrica in Umbria. 1.2 Nascita ed evoluzione di una psichiatria di comunità in Umbria*, Perugia, Morlacchi, 2021 (vol. 1, pp. 448), 2022 (vol. 2, pp. 506).

Despite the extraordinary breadth and importance of radical psychiatry in Italy in the Sixties, Seventies and Eighties, there has been too little critical and historical work which has reflected on this complicated and fascinating “movement”. Much of the material which is available has often been celebratory, or merely descriptive. The monumental work of Francesco Scotti, when added to that already published by the late Ferruccio Giacanelli, is the exception. It would be no exaggeration to argue that these three volumes provide us with a full, open, detailed and critical account of the extraordinary role played by radical psychiatry in the region of Umbria, from the Sixties onwards. Scotti’s work has the great merit of openness – it never celebrates change, or pats itself on the back, but rather analyses, discusses, questions and deconstructs. As both the protagonist of the movement in Umbria, and its historian and chronicler, it would have been easy for Scotti to exalt the vast progress made by the movement in that region – in closing down repressive and damaging systems of care for mental health and in opening up new institutions and systems. But this is never the way these volumes work.

No other regional movement has taken this approach to its own history, with the possible exception of Arezzo. These volumes represent a vast historical, pedagogical, and psychiatric project – a narrative but also – crucially – a forward-looking account which takes the story up to today, and is always open to questions, to errors as well as successes, and to divisions debates and fissures which also marked this movement. It is also a global account, not inward-looking, but always looking outwards. This critical approach, like the meetings which were held with patients and doctors during the “heroic” phase of the movement within the asylum – is in the spirit of the movement it recounts and analyses.



There is so much in here which is of interest, it is difficult to choose what to discuss – so I will draw out some of the overarching themes which emerge from the books. First, there is the asylum itself – the *manicomio* – in Perugia a vast institution in both a physical and a medical sense, which dominated everything else. Scotti shows time and again how the asylum, despite the efforts of the movement, was extremely difficult to “destroy”. Even when the radical psychiatrists had moved onto mental health centres and decentralised care, the asylum didn’t go away – and continued to absorb resources, energy, politics – both in the city and the region but also in the minds and consciousness of the general public concerning mental health and illness. Even when the psychiatrists tried to ignore it, they were drawn back to it time and time. It took decades for this presence to finally fade, and even now, it remains part of the debate. One conclusion to be drawn from these books is how difficult it was to move on from the asylum system, and how its power was embedded in the health system and in the minds of those who had to deal with mental illness.

A second key theme is the ferment of ideas, meetings, discussions, debates and innovation, often discussed with global experts and thinkers, which moved around the world of radical psychiatry in Umbria from the Sixties onwards. This was a set of themes and problems which mobilised an entire region, and which created new forms of institutions, of care and of thinking about mental health. Of course, there was often discussion, and division, over the “correct” path towards mental health – through society, through the family, through the treatment of children. Which therapies, where, and how? Which kinds of treatment? Who was to be treated? Who decided? These are all questions which run throughout Scotti’s book and open up issues which are still relevant today. Umbria in this sense had the distinction of always concentrating on the resolution of problems, not on the creation of over-arching “theories”.

A third theme lies in the increasing bureaucracy and its dead weight which Scotti details, and critiques, in the latter parts of the volume. The proliferation of acronyms and organisations, which Scotti treats with his usual sense of lightness and irony, are a symptom of this problem. Rules, regulations and problematic power structures have been imposed on systems which were marked by creativity and freedom. Judicial power, once liberatory in Umbria in the earlier stage (in some instances) became more oppressive, as psychiatrists lived under fear of criminal prosecution for simply doing their job or taking the risks they saw as necessary in difficult, daily situations. Scotti’s use of stories and micro-histories is especially effective here. Certain extraordinary personalities from the move-

ment emerge with force from his account – Carlo Manuali, for example – who has been more or less ignored in many studies of the Italian radical psychiatry movement, but who was, undoubtedly, one of the most original practitioners and thinkers around themes of mental health and society from that period.

Scotti also details the role of politics, and of a series of reforms, including what he refers to as *Aziendalizzazione* – the business-type approach to health care. Here we are presented with a story of fragmentation, of a loss of autonomy and freedom to experiment, and of – at times – a sense of a return to the past – with patients being treated as a problem rather than with care and attention, and the political system tinkering dangerously with a system which had worked so well, and had been recognised not just in Italy, but also elsewhere, as an exemplary set of institutions in terms of mental health care. Here, we can see issues with the lack of coordination between services, and, at times, the excessive use of forced treatment provisions which were adopted so sparingly in the past, when the idea of “non-ricovero” was the over-arching aim of all those involved in the system.

Finally, these books also provide a rich social history of Umbria through many of the stories and vignettes which Scotti recounts. Psychiatrists working in the system in the period of change never saw mental illness in isolation, but also in line with social context, the family, the territory. Factory work and conditions could lead to forms of addiction and illness in themselves, and some extraordinary examples of this are detailed in this book.

On every page of these books I found something which was worth thinking about and reflecting upon, so much so that I covered my volumes with pen marks, questions, queries, notes to myself to follow up on certain points, and bookmarks. This experience with all its richness, and with all its highs, and lows, successes, and failures, experiments and tragedies, deserves to be studied by all those interested in what happened with mental health systems in Italy (and the world) between the Sixties and the Nineties and beyond, and by all those with an interest in mental health today. The danger is that this whole period, this whole movement, this entire period of radical change, will be forgotten, and that the asylum will return – in another form, of course. These volumes are also a warning, and an incentive, to stop this happening.

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RECENSIONI

Patrick WILLIAMS | *Tsiganes ou ces inconnus qu'on appelle aussi Gitans, Bohémiens, Roms, Gypsies, Manouches, Rabouins, Gens du voyage...*, Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, 2022, pp. 601.

At the age of seven, Patrick Williams discovered the Mānuš world from the counter of his grandmother, who ran a café in a small Creuse village¹. At twenty-one, he stepped through the door of a little house in Bagnolet and was introduced to the world of the Parisian Roma. The choice of ethnology came later. Drawn into the hustle of romani life, Williams made ethnographic writing his compass, a way of travelling between worlds. *Tsiganes ou ces inconnus qu'on appelle aussi Gitans, Bohémiens, Roms, Gypsies, Manouches, Rabouins, Gens du voyage...* is a declaration of love to anthropology and an inestimable testimony of its critical power.

Published posthumously, Williams' latest work brings together in one volume the two books he finished writing in 2015. Originally self-published, the work now appears under a single cover thanks to the editorial work of Martin Olivera and Jean-Luc Poueyto. The first opus, soberly entitled "Souvenirs", is a crossed ethnography in which two very distant worlds, that of Mānuš of Creuse and that of Parisian Roma, respond to each other.

As a child, Williams became friends with boys his own age, sons of Mānuš, who sometimes stopped off in his village in Creuse. These childhood comradeships developed into solid friendships as he grew out of adolescence. Nini, to whom he dedicated his famous book on Mānuš («*Nous, on n'en parle pas*». *Les vivants et les morts chez les Manouches*, Paris, Éditions de la MSH, 1993), would take him on stormy expeditions to visit his scattered family, living in caravans all over the Massif Central. These trips in an old navy-blue Peugeot van were an opportunity to learn the Manouche language, spoken by his friends in their territory between Limagne and Combraille. The roads travelled by Mānuš are

1. This text was originally published in French in the journal *En attendant Nadeau* (2022): <https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2022/10/05/williams-tsiganes-inconnus/>



punctuated by stories and fortuitous encounters: their outings were a time of learning for the narrator and his fellow travelers. Although Nini and Williams' friendship lasted a lifetime, a turning point came: Nini married into a Mānuš family, Williams into a Roma family in Paris.

The anthropologist' entry into adulthood was marked by a new encounter: with the Parisian Roma. While he was studying literature, he was introduced to the *Roma parižoske*—we are not told how, it is one of the mysteries of the book. Williams found himself thrown into a world very different from that of the Mānuš living in Creuse. Very discreet about his marriage to Iultcha, a Parisian Romni woman about whom the reader will know almost nothing, Williams gives a detailed account of his tours in and around Paris with his Roma comrades. After the muddy roads of the Creuse department, the narrator takes the reader to the “north-north-west” suburbs of Paris: Montreuil, Bagnolet, Bondy, Sarcelles, Saint-Denis, Courbevoie and so on. There was no planned itinerary to guide the young men; it was luck (*e bax*) and visits to pubs that kept them wandering.

These two narratives avoid the traps of the conventional ethnographic present: Williams never shows us “the Gypsies”, but a small group of Mānuš in Creuse in the Sixties and a company of Roma in Paris in the Seventies. This first opus is therefore a monographic demonstration of how suspicious any global discourse on “Gypsies” can be. Throughout his career, the anthropologist never stopped saying it in different ways: it is important to “consider each community in a certain place and at a certain time”, and start the ethnographic work from scratch with each new encounter. In the author's own words, the “Souvenirs” book foreshadows all the themes addressed in the second, entitled “Definitions”: “When I reread it, I have the feeling that I've written the same book twice” (p. 15).

The second volume of *Tsiganes ou ces inconnus qu'on appelle aussi Gitans, Bohémiens, Roms, Gypsies, Manouches, Rabouins, Gens du voyage...* is indeed a theory of Romani diversity. Hence the importance of this long-winded title, which the author describes as a “tintinnabulous *ribambelle* of labels” (p. 560). Let's not be fooled by the *trompe-l'œil* typography of the cover page which displays the word “Gypsies”. The book's central idea is to explore the recompositions of Romani worlds throughout various situations, and discuss whether it is possible to speak of a totality and to give that totality a name. The social sciences and common sense use of categories such as “Gypsies”, “Roma” and “Travellers” erases the singularity of those they are trying to name. For over forty years, Williams was considered by the academic world to be the

“anthropologist of Gypsies”. Yet he leaves us with a curious legacy when he writes that “Gypsies” are “neither an ethnic group nor a scientific category” (p. 381) – in short, that “Gypsies” exist only in our representations and prejudices. Those who do exist, however, and with great intensity, are the “Slovensko Roma, Gadjkene Mānuš, Travellers, Gitanos canasteros, Gitanos caseros, Rom kalderaš, Rom čurara, Xoraxané Roma, Gammon Travellers, Cant Travellers, Sinti piémontais, Sinte Eftavagaria, Valštike Mānuš, Gitanos catalanes, Tinkers, Kaale, Calos, Calon Yéniš, Mugat, Nawars, Voyageurs, Rom lovara” (p. 413), etc.

Patrick Williams teaches us that the twentieth century saw the invention of the “Gypsy people”, who would later be called the “Romani people”. Based on the thesis of “Indian origin” inspired by the linguistic discovery linking the romani language to India in the 18th century, the Nazis were the first to give existence to the “Zigeuner Volk”. Williams examines the paradox of a “‘final solution’ as the starting point not of a rebirth, but of a birth” (p. 361). After all, it was only after the genocide that the idea of a “people” led to the emergence of a Romani political movement. History also contributed in part to this fiction by writing a “history of Gypsies/Roma”, when in reality it focuses only on the point of view of states seeking to control heterogeneous groups. The political utopia of a “Romani people” itself remains far from the minds of local communities today, as the author reminds us with some humour: “I remember the comment made by a middle-aged Sinto to his cousin one evening during a peaceful conversation ‘by the fire’ [...]: ‘Ah, did you see? Now they think we’re Roma!’” (p. 561).

But how can one talk about parts if there is no totality? Referring to Peirce and his theory of “unlimited semiosis” (Charles Sanders Peirce, *Écrits sur le signe. Textes choisis*, Paris, Seuil, 1978), Williams highlights the co-signification of the terms “Gypsies” and *gadjé* – those who are not “Roma” – as an oppositional semantic pair. There is no point in trying to define one without the other. As for the problem of the right name, it is insoluble. Well aware that his answer will inevitably arouse astonishment “at a time when all minorities declare themselves in need of recognition”, the anthropologist argues that a human group does not need a name to exist. The totality is the one formed together by “Gypsies and *gadjé*”, despite the tragic asymmetry of their history. Williams delivers a critical lesson of humanity.

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