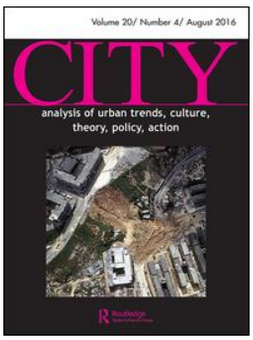

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City
analysis of urban trends, culture, theory, policy, action

ISSN: 1360-4813 (Print) 1470-3629 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ccit20

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To cite this article: Nicola Montagna (2006) The de-commodification of urban space and the occupied social centres in Italy , City, 10:3, 295-304, DOI: 10.1080/13604810600980663

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13604810600980663

CITY, VOL. 10, NO. 3, DECEMBER 2006

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The de-commodification of urban space and the occupied social centres in Italy[1]

Nicola Montagna

This paper will describe the social uses of urban space by an urban movement actor, the Venetian 'occupied social centre' Rivolta. It considers the occupied social centres (OSCs) in Italy as heterogeneous experiences that rely on illegal occupations of disused buildings and their self-management. They become social and de-commodified spaces where activists set up political and cultural initiatives. Self-managing and self-organization are the principles through which the occupants organize political and social activities. In this paper I will provide a general overview of this heterogeneous archipelago and interpret the Rivolta as a proactive and multidimensional movement actor that challenges a widespread view that occupations of urban space take the form of ghettos.

Introduction

Urban social movements (USMs) have become a permanent collective actor over the last 30 years. However, their sometimes reactive and often parochial character has also raised questions about the progressive or conservative political nature of these movements (Fainstein and Hirst, 1995; Mayer, 2000a, 2000b), their centrality or marginality with respect to class conflict (Castells, 1977; Mingione, 1981), their ability to perform social change and to compete with local elites in shaping urban space (Molotch, 1976; Molotch and Logan, 1984). In the 1980s Castells' work (1983) ennobled USMs to the rank of social and political actors which promote a different kind of politics to shape and establish functions of the city. They are no longer parochial but aim to change 'urban meaning', that is, the material and symbolic hierarchies that structure urban life. In so doing USMs become actors aiming to organize a city around use values, cultural autonomy and participatory democracy, and producing social change. Even much of the recent scientific literature on USMs does not question the ability of urban communities to embody progressive tendencies and renew democracy, regenerate urban environment and deliver welfare services (Hamel *et al.*, 2000; Evans, 2002; della Porta, 2004; Vitale, 2006).

This paper will describe the social uses of urban space by an urban movement actor, the Venetian 'occupied social centre' *Rivolta*. It considers the city as not merely a demarcation of legal, political or topographical features, but a place where any given parcel of land represents an interest, which is not only economic but also social and cultural, 'a mosaic of competing land interests capable of strategic coalition and action' (Molotch, 1976, p. 310). Space is socially produced (Lefebvre, 1991; Martin and Miller, 2003) and different conflicting actors, including organized urban communities, contribute to its production and meaning. In this respect, the *Rivolta* organizes the interests of some urban communities, such as migrants, youths, flexible workers, welfare recipients, and contributes to the social production of the city through a combination of conflictual strategies and

ISSN 1360-4813 print/ISSN 1470-3629 online/06/030295-10 © 2006 Taylor & Francis
DOI: 10.1080/13604810600980663

consensual organizational processes. Because the *Rivolta* is a node of the movement area of occupied social centre (OSC), the first section provides a general overview of this heterogeneous archipelago. The second section examines the urban area where the *Rivolta* is located, the industrial neighbourhood of Marghera in Venice, and will outline the evolution of the *Rivolta* from a marginalized to a central actor.

This paper considers the *Rivolta* from different perspectives and places it in a wider analytical framework. Firstly, it shows that movement actors can develop consensual organizational processes without losing their conflictual nature. On the one hand, the *Rivolta* produces and delivers services and other public goods within specific and formal organizational contexts. On the other hand, it expresses conflictual orientations which target political opponents in local, national and global institutions (Diani and Bison, 2004). Secondly, it argues that the *Rivolta* is an actor that uses political opportunities to develop its action strategies. We will consider political opportunities as a dynamic process rather than as a structure, the outcome of the interaction between several actors. These interactions involve not only the conditions under which social and political action take place but also the actors' ability to interpret and frame them. Thirdly, this paper aims to challenge a widespread view that the occupation of urban space is an expression of marginal and ghettoized actors. We will see that, by activating both conflictual and consensual organizational processes and exploiting political opportunities, the *Rivolta* is a major actor in the conflict for the control and organization of central social resources such as urban space, cultural meanings and welfare services.

Empty spaces/contended spaces

We can consider the OSCs in Italy as a way of using urban space which relies on the illegal occupation of disused buildings and their self-management. Self-management is the internal organizational principle and is based on a radical criticism of representative democracy, the rejection of any kind of bureaucratic hierarchy, and the adoption of horizontal and participative forms of decision-making processes (Andretta, 2004). Through these practices the occupied buildings become social and de-commodified spaces where activists self-organize political initiatives, cultural events and community services.

Their informal and partially illegal nature makes the OSCs precarious places. Most of them are connected in loose multifaceted networks. In the 1980s there were only a few, while research carried out in the 1990s mapped about 120 of them (Dazieri, 1996). The number has grown further in the last few years and there are probably about 150. They are spread throughout the whole national territory with a large concentration in Milan and Turin, and in the capital city Rome. Even the number of activists is highly volatile, and depends on several factors, such as the nature of the campaigns, the characteristics of the initiatives and the coverage given by the media.

The historical origins of the OSCs are rooted in the antagonistic juvenile social movements of the 1970s (Moroni, 1994; Membretti, 2003; Montagna, 2005, 2006) when 'groups of young people started a process of "claiming the city" through widespread squatting of public spaces and the occupation of empty buildings' (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 170). Although some components and activists still proudly claim the political identity of the new left of the 1970s, the OSCs are social actors well-rooted in the present time and their presence would not be possible without the transition from industrial to post-industrial society. On the one hand, the OSCs have settled in the physical voids left by the dismantling of inner-city factories and their move towards extra-urban areas. On the other hand, the social composition of the OSCs reflects the labour force restructuring that has occurred in Italy over

the last 20 years or so and the current fragmentation of the labour market, based on the increase of flexible work in the service sector and the decline of permanent and full-time employment (Bascetta, 1994).

Most of the OSCs participate in regional and national networks based on self-help, shared identities and tactical alliances for specific campaigns. The theorized organizational model is the net constituted of nodes, independent one from another, but connected by a web of knowledge (Vecchi, 1994, p. 12). This structure has a variable geometric form. It allows the OSCs to enjoy a certain autonomy and to build relations with other social and political subjects, not necessarily homogeneous in terms of identity and objectives. According to Dines, these movement networks differ in political and cultural orientation (libertarians, neo-Leninists, post-autonomous, non-ideological), in relation with institutions (hostile, pragmatic, strategic), and in purpose (cultural, political, social): 'occupation and self-managing as methodology and the safeguarding of their political autonomy still remain the common features; however, the practical implications of these are problematic too. *Centro Sociale* is a category that varies in time and space' (1999, p. 91).

On these bases we can divide the OSCs into the 'counter-cultural' and the 'political', which often cross and combine with each other. The 'counter-cultural' networks mainly emphasize the innovations of cultural languages, an alternative use of communication and information technology, and the promotion of independent music, alternative models of development and ethical lifestyles (Moroni, 1996; Wright, 2000). The 'political' networks target political opponents and adopt repertoires of protest based on direct action and civil disobedience. They can be further subdivided into three main movement networks. The Libertarians refuse any kind of formalization of their structures and dialogue with state institutions, but also with movements that they judge too moderate (Berzano *et al*., 2002). The Antagonists and Antimperialists, feel themselves legitimate inheritors of the autonomist movements of the 1970s and base their analyses of the social system on Marxist class categories. The Disobedients reclaim the heretical Marxist tradition and argue that Western capitalist economies have been experiencing a transitional period from Fordism to post-Fordism.

However, drawing a line between the counter-cultural and political areas is often hard. On the one hand the counter-cultural are often involved in political processes, organize solidarity campaigns, take part in protest events. On the other hand, the political networks organize counter-cultural processes, explore new languages and lifestyles. Both of them set up fair trade local markets, small cafés and typical *trattorie* promoting ecologically sustainable food and preserving culinary traditions.

The OSC *Rivolta* and the making of an actor between the local and the global

The OSC *Rivolta* is located in the industrial area of *Porto Marghera* in the town of Venice-Mestre. Venice is a city made up of two socially and geographically different urban agglomerates: the historic centre and Mestre. The former is built on a group of islets and mud banks in the middle of Laguna Veneta, a crescent-shaped lagoon separated from the Adriatic Sea by a barrier of narrow islands and peninsulas. This is the old part of the city, painted by Canaletto, and used in dozens of novels and movies. Its present is precarious and not only because of the risk of floods and tidal waves, but also because of its almost exclusively tourist economy, its ageing population and the lack of affordable housing for local residents. Spreading inland from the Laguna Veneta is Mestre and the industrial borough of Marghera occupied by *Porto Marghera* and its enormous shipping docks. A one kilometre long road connects the historic and modern parts of the city.

For the last few decades *Porto Marghera* has been undertaking massive transformation

and de-industrialization processes. Since the 1970s, industrial employment has dramatically decreased from 30,000 to the present 11,700 (Favaretto, 2004). *Porto Marghera* is still an area with a high density of enterprises, although it is now concerned with redevelopment processes based on the principle of economic diversifying, environmental sustainability, recovery of run-down industrial buildings and restructuring of the viability system (Rispoli *et al*., 1998; Rullani and Micelli, 1998).

The *Rivolta*'s site is in a former Fordist factory and faces onto one of the main roads of the town, which divides the residential and the industrial areas of Marghera. It is a multifunctional structure big enough to host several thousands of people, a number of initiatives, both recreational and political, and to organize different kinds of community services. Part of this structure has been acquired by the local council and temporarily assigned to some formal associations linked to the *Rivolta* activists and providing community services. Another part of the area is still occupied and its activities focus on protest and political action. According to the spokesperson of the *Rivolta* this place '*had the right characteristics to become an ideal town, meant as the first utopians intended a self sufficient town*'. As the analysis of its evolution will show, the *Rivolta* is an example of a proactive actor that, through established networks of solidarity and mutual support, operates and mobilizes at the local, national and global level. From this point of view its links are multiple. At a transnational level it has contacts with European movement groups, American activists, and Central and South-American organizations such as the EZLN. At a national level it is part of the Disobedient Movement, while at regional level it participates in the network of OSCs and autonomous spaces[2] of the North-East regions of Italy[3] and collaborates with a number of local social and political entities.

Its campaigns are the result of the ability of the *Rivolta* activists to exploit the opportunities offered by the political context. Theory and empirical research has shown that a wide variety of local, national or global political opportunities can influence the emergence of movements and how they address their issues. They are present under various forms and affect social movements in a variety of ways. Some of these are the openness of the political system, changes in political alliances, mass media access, strength of social cleavages and the development of social struggles. These opportunities widen the chances of success for a social movement and as Donatella della Porta (2004, p. 28) puts it: 'Mobilisation grows when there are hopes that some changes can be obtained.'

However, changes in political opportunities do not sufficiently explain why social movements develop. Political opportunities have not rigid boundaries but are part of continuously negotiated and re-negotiated dynamics. In this respect the political environment is not fixed and eternal but it is a process that social activists can change (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996). As Gamson and Meyer (1996, p. 276) state: 'Opportunities open the way for political action, but movements also make opportunities … Opportunities may shape or constrain movements, but movements can create opportunities as well.' Activists frame and adapt political processes, changing their strategies in relation to them. For political processes to turn into opportunities activists need the perception and some form of awareness that specific opportunities exist. Therefore, movement actors have to activate mechanisms of interpretation in order to recognize a specific situation as a political opportunity (McAdam *et al*., 2001).

As far as the OSC *Rivolta* is concerned, we will see that several political conditions have favoured its transition from a marginal to a central actor. At the same time the activists of the *Rivolta* have been able to interpret changes in the political environment as a chance to broaden their political activity, combining local and global dimensions and conflictual and consensual processes. On these bases, since its first occupation in 1989, three main phases can be described.

October 1989–spring 1995: a tolerated ghetto

The first occupation of the *Rivolta* in 1989 was fuelled by two national political processes: the wave of occupations that had been occurring all over the country, as a consequence of the solidarity movement for the *Leoncavallo*,[4] and the rise of the 'Panther' movement in Italian universities in winter 1990.[5] If the national context was favourable, the local one ranged from open hostility to indifference. This phase took the form of the tolerated ghetto where the occupants were permitted to stay, but out of sight of mainstream society (Castells, 1994). The structural conditions of the place and its marginal location with respect to Venice, the capital town of the region and epicentre of movement initiatives, did not allow the *Rivolta* to become a catalyst of either cultural or political initiatives. The occupants concentrated mainly on organizing musical events and having an autonomous self-contained space where they could defend their identity.

1995–1999: political processes and the welfare from below

Things changed over the second half of the 1990s when a new building was occupied nearby, and the activists of the North-East started to attribute a new political centrality to it, some moving from other towns of the region to Venice as a result (Figures 1 and 2). According to an activist who was part of the *Rivolta* in 1997: '*From a political point of view, I think that they focused on the* Rivolta *as a central element, not only in the town but in the whole region. The current* Rivolta *is the application of a political plan*.' In a short time, from a tolerated ghetto trying to resist changes the *Rivolta* became the central locus of political action, a social actor rooted in the urban context and a political entrepreneur engaged in political conflicts.

Initiatives focused on a number of issues such as the chemical pollution of the area, the new forms of poverty, the flexibility of work, the harm reduction and the legalization of recreational drugs, and particularly on the

Figure 1 The gate of the CSO *Rivolta*. *Source*: http://www.elestadiodelbae.org/album1.htm

construction of 'welfare from below', a 'non-state' public sphere 'obtained through conflict and struggle from below'[6] and made up of a network of services relying on community organizations and workers' cooperatives. Most of these initiatives were carried out at a local level, although the international dimension, for example, the European treaty and the Chiapas insurrection, at the time informed the thinking.

A number of international, national and local processes facilitated this sort of development: the Zapatistas revolution in 1994 and its emphasis on local communities, participatory democracy, and the relationship between conflict and consensus (Le Bot, 1997); the unstable Italian political situation in the mid-1990s, whose main signals were the collapse and transformation of the main political parties and the growth of the ethnic-regionalist movement of the Northern League (Biorcio, 1997); some electoral reforms and the subsequent empowerment of local institutions. More importantly, the election of a centre-left council in Venice in 1993, run by the philosopher Massimo Cacciari and including the Greens and *Rifondazione Comunista*, led to a new kind of relationship between institutions and the movement of the OSCs. The *Rivolta* activists found in the local politicians, town administrators and mid-level bureaucrats some institutional allies. They interacted and cooperated in a variety of institutional projects, in relation to the provision of welfare services, and in political campaigns, for example, against the secessionism proposed by the Northern League. According to the *Rivolta* activists, on the one hand political institutions started a process of 'recognition of the principle of self-management and self-government',[7] and on the other hand conditions were appropriate to realize what they had described some years earlier as the 'appropriation of the administrative nexus'.

1999–2005: the global and the local

During this phase the *Rivolta* experienced probably its most intense period of activities, organized at national, global and local level. First, at national level the *Rivolta* took part in the *Movimento delle Tute Bianche* (the White Overalls Movement) and *Movimento dei Disobbedienti* (the Disobedient Movement). They organized contentious campaigns against the *Centri di Permanenza Temporanea* (CPT)—temporary detention centres—for undocumented migrants, the Italian participation in the war in Kosovo, and to promote the rights of social citizenship for those social subjects generally excluded from welfare benefits such as migrants, precarious flexible workers and the unemployed.

Second, as part of the *Movimento delle Tute Bianche* (the White Overalls Movement) and *Movimento dei Disobbedienti* (the Disobedient Movement) the *Rivolta* activists were involved in the global movement against neo-liberal globalization, and took part in a number of transnational campaigns such as the no-global war campaign, in the *Carovana Zapatista* in Mexico and Action for Peace in Palestine. Largely influenced by Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt's work, they assumed globalization to be an ineluctable process which 'has to be interpreted and viewed as the inevitable horizon of social struggles and conquests' (Negri, 2000, p. 97).

Local action assumed two forms. On the one hand, it continued taking the form of collective action with conflictual orientations and targeting local opponents. In this period the *Rivolta* activists organized housing occupations, 'ticket strikes' on public transport, 'discount on shopping', consisting of a negotiated reduction of the bill in local supermarkets, road blocks, demonstrations and petitions against polluting chemical plants, sabotage actions directed towards detention centres and hospitality for undocumented migrants and raids against racist groups and the neo-fascists.

On the other hand, local action took the form of consensual organizational processes. As a direct consequence of the debate on 'welfare from below' and *Rivolta*'s relations with local institutions, a number of

Figure 2 '*Trattoria* allo sbirro morto' (at the dead cop) at the CSO *Rivolta*. *Source*: http://www.elestadiodelbae.org/album1.htm

organizations and associations relying on institutional funding were established, delivering services and other public goods in some sensitive areas. Some of the voluntary activities, such as education projects, advice to migrants, support for homeless people, in which the *Rivolta* activists were already involved, were turned into services delivered by more formal organizations. This process, which included formal contacts and relations with institutions, rules, statutes, a professional approach involving the appointment of people to established positions, made its acceptance unclear and caused resentment within the *Rivolta*. Those activists who thought that militancy should be volunteer-based did not accept this change and left the *Rivolta*, as reported by one activist:

> '*For many activists it was hard to see what we were doing as a part of political activism, as part of our political growth … The fact that you get money to do these kinds of activities is read as something … 'That is work—politics is something else.' There is still this difficulty.*'

However, according to other activists of the *Rivolta*, the associational shift does not jeopardize their conflictual nature. According to them conflict has still a central role not only in pushing forward the compatibility limits of a given system but also in preventing some sorts of degeneration towards mercantilist or subsidiary forms of welfare provision.

Conclusion: conflict vs. consensus?

In concluding, I would like to recapitulate the main findings of this paper and put them in a broader theoretical context. First, I have interpreted the *Rivolta* as a proactive and multidimensional movement actor involved in urban conflicts, which question the division of space, and the delivery of public services to improve the welfare of local communities. I have challenged a widespread and shared view that occupations of urban space take the form of ghettos (Castells, 1994). We have seen that they can assume the form of conflict, aiming at control of central resources such as urban

space, cultural identity and the provision of welfare services.

Second, we have seen that the degree of openness or closure of political institutions and the possibility of finding allies within the system can facilitate or discourage the rise of social movements (Neveu, 2001) and influence their direction towards specific forms of action. A number of local, national and global processes have encouraged a change in the strategy of the *Rivolta*. On the other hand, we have emphasized the ability of the *Rivolta* activists to frame these events and turn them into opportunities. By considering the cognitive processes which have intervened between the political opportunity structure and the *Rivolta*'s activists' action (della Porta and Diani, 1999, p. 224), we have given a dynamic meaning to the concept of political opportunities. At the same time we have seen that the relation between movements and institutions is discontinuous and transforms both opponents, by modifying their political openness or closure as well as their repertoires and policing of protest.

Third, these possibilities have been developed through a combination of both conflictual movement processes and organizational processes (Diani and Bison, 2004). They have been encouraged by the double status of the social centre area, which is in part given in convention to some associations set up by the *Rivolta* activists and in part is still squatted. This double status shows that 'boundaries between institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics are hard to draw with precision' (McAdam *et al*., 2001, p. 7), and that consensual action can coexist with contentious politics within the same actor. Far from becoming an institution, the *Rivolta* integrates unconventional forms of protest and activities of service provision for the local community. Conflict is still a main requisite but a movement actor can be involved in consensual organizational processes.

The fourth and final point regards the *Rivolta* as a political entrepreneur. On the one hand, it interprets needs, collective imagery and political tensions mobilizing material and symbolic resources. Acting as a political entrepreneur (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Zald and McCarthy, 1987; Gamson, 1990) combines the resources of the environment and turns them into social and political capital. The term 'resource' covers a wide variety of meanings, ranging from funds from the local council, to sociality, culture, demands for autonomy and availability of voluntary work. On the other hand the *Rivolta* serves as a political entrepreneur in that it is motivated in terms of 'creative destruction' (Schumpeter, 1976). This paper aims to show that for movement actors and political subjects what Marx and Engels (1967) wrote about the bourgeoisie and what Schumpeter said about capitalism are both true: they can never be stationary and they cannot exist without incessantly revolutionizing the conditions of their existence. The *Rivolta* is an example of creative destruction, a political actor constantly has to destroy the old conditions and create new ones. It is an innovative and conflictual form of collective action which, in order to survive and expand, needs to innovate its strategies, beliefs and identity and to shape the contexts in which it operates.

Notes

1 This paper is based on 42 interviews and participant observation carried out with activists of the occupied social centre *Rivolta* and of the Disobedient Movement in Italy between 2001 and 2003.

2 They include: CSO Rivolta (Venice-Mestre), CSO Pedro (Padova), CopyRiot Cafè (Padova), Fuori Controllo (Monselice), Laboratorio Morion (Venice), Nuovo Capannone Sociale (Vicenza), CSO Clandestino (Gorizia), Casa delle Culture (Trieste), TPO (Bologna), Ci.Cu.Ta.—Circuito Culturale Tana (Trento).

3 They include Veneto, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Trentino Alto Adige and some areas of Emilia Romagna and particularly the city of Bologna.

4 On 16 August 1989 hundreds of armed police besieged, attacked and evicted the Leoncavallo, the oldest and most celebrated Italian CSO. The activists, who had known of the eviction order and

were waiting for the police, actively resisted. The battle involved extensive use of Molotov cocktails and tear gas, and lasted more than one hour, until the police defeated the resistance, cleared the building of youths and allowed the owner to demolish it. The ruthless and violent eviction and the resistance brought to public attention the existence of the CSO as a cultural project and a political subject. Although demolished and reduced to ruins, the site was soon re-occupied and partially rebuilt by hundreds of volunteers. The attempted eviction was turned into a great movement of solidarity (Ibba, 1999) while the resistance ignited a new wave of occupations all over the country. The images of the young activists besieged within the Milanese CSO spread all over the country and became a *topos* of opposition to institutions after a long period of cultural normalization (Membretti, 2003).

5 The 'Panther' movement involved dozens of universities and thousands of students. It was brought about by a university reform bill aiming to augment financial autonomy for each university and links between public education and the private sector. According to the students, this reform would lead universities to abandon their public institutional role and behave as private enterprises, looking for resources among private subjects in order to increase their profits.

6 Discussion document: CSO Rivolta, 'Linee guida per il Progetto di fattibilità delle opere di ristrutturazione e messa a norma ad uso socio-culturale dei manufatti dell'area "ex Paolini Villani" a Marghera, oggi occupata dal CSO Rivolta PVC', Venice, 1999.

7 Ibid.

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