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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Relation between Direct Social Action and Repoliticisation: the Case of the New *Case del Popolo* in South Italy

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ABSTRACT: This contribution aims to analyse the political effects of direct social action through the case of Potere al Popolo, a young radical left movement born in Italy. The strategy of this movement is based on a network of *Case del Popolo* where activists participate in direct social action such as free legal advice, alternative cultural activities or food distribution. Focusing our research on South Italy, this form of collective action will be analysed through the concepts of the actionalist theory. This will allow us to understand to what extent these new *Case del Popolo* can act as hubs for repoliticisation. The data used in this article are based on a qualitative method including interviews in the sites under investigation, a participant observation and the analysis of the communication of the political movement.

KEYWORDS: Direct Social Action, Radical Left, South Italy, Potere al Popolo, Case del Popolo, Mutualism, Repoliticisation, Subjectivisation, Collective Action

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1. Introduction

The processes of politicisation, depoliticisation or repoliticisation have been the subject of numerous publications in social sciences. Some authors have offered to analyse these processes in a democratic framework (Hamidi 2010; Luhtakallio 2012; D'Albergo and Moini 2019). Others have focused on the study of politicisation and depoliticisation processes in an authoritarian setting (Linz 2000; Zaki 2008). In the context of the study of refugee solidarity activism in Italy, Lorenzo Zamponi (2017) offered an analysis of the relationship between politicisation and direct social action (hereafter, DSA), understood as "forms of action that focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself, instead of claiming something from the state or other power holders" (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, 1). Zamponi and Bosi (2018) have produced an analysis of the relationship between direct social action and politicisation through the study of alternative action organisations in Italy, Greece and Spain. In this contribution, we intend to analyse the relationship between direct social action and repoliticisation in Southern Italy, through the case of Potere al Popolo, a young political movement of the Italian radical left.

Potere al Popolo (Power to the People) was born in November 2017 in Naples with the aim of representing an anti-capitalist alternative on the occasion of the March 2018 parliamentary elections. The political strategy of Potere al Popolo is based on a network of *Casa del Popolo* (hereafter, CDP) in which activists organise DSA practices. CDP appeared at the end of the 19th century under the impulse of the Italian Socialist Party (Kohn 2003; Degl'Innocenti 1984). Therefore, these structures are not exclusively related to Potere al Popolo. In addition, a multitude of different actors are involved in the territorial networks of Potere al Popolo. Originally, this movement was composed of different collectives throughout Italy. Some of them were members of *Centri Sociali*, and others were militants in political parties, such as the Communist Refoundation Party. According to Giovanni Piazza, a *Centro Sociale* is:

A large abandoned building previously used for non-residential purposes (former factories, schools, theatres, cinemas, etc.) that is occupied by activists of the antagonistic left to self-organise and self-manage mainly political, social and counter-cultural activities with the aim of practicing participatory and non-hierarchical models of organisation¹. (Piazza 2012a, 9)

There were also trade unions such as USB (Unione Sindacale di Base), workers' collectives such as the Clash City Workers and popular action movements such as EuroStop (I1). The movement also gave rise to new local actors, who were able to execute their action plan by founding a *Casa del Popolo*². This paper focuses exclusively on CDP whose identity is strictly linked to Potere al Popolo, because the collective that is developed there shares its political project and is totally involved in it. With this in mind, we will tackle an analysis of the relation between repoliticisation and Potere al Popolo's direct social action in the *Mezzogiorno*. This macro-region refers to the southern half of Italy, consisting of the following regions: Abruzzo, Molise, Campania, Basilicata, Calabria, Puglia, Sardinia and Sicily (ISTAT 2007).

The choice of the *Mezzogiorno* as a privileged field of study for this analysis is linked to the social, political and economic characteristics of this geographical area. Indeed, Southern Italy is characterised by reduced accessibility to fundamental rights (SVIMEZ 2018; ISTAT 2019a; 2019b; Eurostat 2019). Indeed, the Association for the Development of Industry in the Mezzogiorno published a report in 2018 stating a situation of "limited citizenship" of the inhabitants of the regions of Southern Italy. The social indicators presented in this report show that the citizens of this macro-region are more vulnerable to social risks such as poverty or unemployment and that their quality of life is altered due to the delayed development of public services. For example, in 2018, the youth unemployment rate in Calabria, Campania and Sicily was among the highest in

¹ This quote was translated from Italian to English by the author.

² Singular of *Casa del Popolo*.

Europe. This situation is not new and has been called the “questione meridionale” (Southern question) in Italy. It leads a lot of southerners to emigrate to the North of Italy or abroad, as they see no future prospects in the *Mezzogiorno* (Bianchi and Frascilla 2020). In addition, Southern citizens are less interested in politics and voter turnout is consistently lower (ISTAT 2018). The low conventional political participation and the high electoral volatility (Cerruto 2012) indicate, according to some authors, that parties find it more difficult to establish themselves in the long term, which would be a sign of a growing distance between citizens and political institutions (De Luca 1997; Bianchi and Frascilla 2020). This self-exclusion could be explained, in particular, by a feeling of abandonment of the inhabitants of the *Mezzogiorno*. In addition, the Southern issue is at the heart of Potere al Popolo's political agenda (Il Programma di Potere al Popolo 2018, 127-128) and the activists often refer to this situation when they justify the choice of DSA in the *Mezzogiorno*. Therefore, this contribution aims at analysing the relationship between DSA and politicisation, in the particular context of the Italian *Mezzogiorno*, which is characterised, despite the democratic nature of the Italian state, by a limited citizenship. This would not have been possible by studying the effects of direct social action at the national level, as the northern half of Italy does not share these characteristics.

The complex situation of the *Mezzogiorno* and the choice of Potere al Popolo to use DSA led us to ask what are the outcomes of Potere al Popolo's DSA in this macro-region. This issue raised several questions. First, what is the meaning of DSA for the activists of Potere al Popolo? What effects does DSA have at the individual and collective level? Is DSA a cause or consequence of repoliticisation? To what extent the *Case del Popolo* could function as hubs for repoliticisation? To answer these questions, we chose a qualitative method, involving the collection of life stories of the actors involved in the DSA of Potere al Popolo in Southern Italy. 24 semi-structured interviews lasting between 1 and 3 hours were held with different types of representatives of the movement, such as leaders, grassroots activists or former members who had decided to suspend their activity within the movement. These life stories were recorded with their agreement and some passages were translated from Italian to English and selected by the author to be included in this contribution. In order to meet the requirements of this research in the singular context linked to the covid-19 global pandemic, the life stories mentioned in this contribution took place via video-conferencing on the internet. The data mobilised in this contribution is also based on a participant observation carried out between November 2018 and March 2020 and from July 12 to 22, 2021, including meetings and discussions with activists of a *Casa del Popolo* of Naples called the Ex-OPG occupato - Je so' pazzo (hereafter, Ex-OPG). It is the former Judicial Psychiatric Hospital of Naples, a 9000m² complex located in the Materdei district, in the center of the city. The Ex-OPG is the first *Casa del Popolo* of Potere al Popolo and the one with the widest number and range of activities. For this reason, direct social action in Potere al Popolo's *Case del Popolo* is inspired from the mutualistic practices that were born in the Ex-OPG. Interviews with representatives of Potere al Popolo in the press, communications published on the websites and social networks of the movement, of its leaders, or of the various collectives of the *Case del Popolo*, as well as book publications by members of the movement, have completed the database upon which the analysis offered in this contribution is based.

Firstly, we'll explain the choice to analyse Potere al Popolo as a collective actor rather than as a political party. We will explore the literature on politicisation in social sciences and offer an actionist approach to politicisation based on the concept of subjectivisation. Secondly, we will briefly trace the history of DSA in Italy and the organisations that Potere al Popolo has drawn on. We will recall that mutualistic practices refer to different forms of organisation and why Potere al Popolo chose to base its strategy on a network of *Case del Popolo*. Thirdly, we will explain the relationship between the Italian political context and Potere al Popolo's choice concerning DSA. Then, we'll explain the meaning of direct social action for Potere al Popolo's activists and the purposes of such practices. Finally, the last section will be devoted to the effects of DSA in terms of repoliticisation.

2. Theoretical Framework: An Actionalist Approach to Repoliticisation

Although Potere al Popolo is a political movement, the theoretical framework chosen in this contribution will not be based on the study of political parties. Indeed, Potere al Popolo is a young political organisation and its capacity to act within the institutional sphere is very limited for now. For this reason, we will study Potere al Popolo as a collective actor, through the concepts of the actionalist theory and the study of new social movements. In the context of the social conflict, the interests and needs of citizens can be expressed through political demand, which presupposes the acceptance, even partial, of the political system's rules and the will to obtain a normative decision from it, involving repercussions on the community (Melucci 1989). However, political demand implies a legitimacy of the group which is expressing it to access the political system and there is:

An important sphere of “non-demand”, of interests that are excluded, marginalised or repressed, that fail to express and organise themselves, that do not gain access to the political system because they are not recognised. [...] They can manifest themselves through the direct action of social movements or through violence, depending on the degree of flexibility of the political system and the adaptability of social organisation.³ (Melucci, 1989, 74-75)

For actionalist theorists, not all social mobilisations are social movements. According to Alain Touraine (1965), a social movement is defined by three principles. On the one hand, the “principle of identity” refers to an awareness of a social group's shared interests. The second principle enunciated by Touraine is the “principle of opposition”, i.e. the ability to define an adversary in the context of a social conflict. The adversary must be identified as a social actor who holds the resources of which another actor feels deprived (Melucci 1989). Therefore, this adversary must be defined inside the political system. The last principle is “the principle of totality”, namely an ability to identify what is at stake in the social conflict, i.e. the control of historicity understood as the ability of a society to produce its own history (Touraine 1965, 1978). A social movement is defined, in sum, as “the organised collective behaviour of a class actor fighting against his class opponent for the social direction of historicity in a concrete community” (Touraine 1978, 104).

Before we can analyse the relation between DSA and repoliticisation, it is necessary to clarify the definition of the concept of repoliticisation that will be used in this contribution. Studies on politicisation processes reveal a debate on the definition of this concept in social sciences. As Aït-Aoudia, Bennani-Chraïbi and Contamin (2011) point out, they can be divided into two categories. Those that refer to a restrictive definition and those that refer to an extensive definition. The restrictive definition is based on indicators related to conventional political participation such as voting, party membership or even political discussions. This definition does not always consider the meaning that actors give to their practices. Thus, the fact of voting is interpreted a priori as an indicator of politicisation, as if it had the same meaning for all actors. However, as Daniel Gaxie (1993) has pointed out, voting is not always a politically meaningful act. If we refer to the concept of depoliticisation, defined by Peter Burnham (2001, 128), as a “governance strategy” which consists in “removing the political character from decision-making”, a restrictive definition of politicisation reveals other weaknesses. In a context of depoliticisation, involving a “reduction in the level of political and social conflictuality of various issues” (D'Albergo and Moini 2019, 5) and a homogenisation of political programs (De Nardis 2017), the relevance of politicisation indicators related to conventional political participation can be questioned. In order to overcome these limitations, other definitions of the concept of politicisation have been developed. They fall into the category of extensive definitions. Some practices assume a political meaning even though they seem to take place in spaces considered as non-political. Thus, in non-democratic societies, artistic practices can constitute a means of political expression and assume a subversive character (Scott 2009). Camille Hamidi (2006) offers an interactionist approach to politicisation using Luc Boltanski's concept of “*montée en généralité*” (Boltanski, 1990) understood as a rise in the level of generality. To define politicisation, Camille

³ This quote was translated from Italian to English by the author.

Hamidi also chose the concept of *conflictualisation*, understood as the recognition of the existence of a plurality of positions defended by actors in a given context. Eeva Luhtakallio (2012) adopts this approach and includes the concept of publicisation developed by Nina Eliasoph (2010), defined as the process that allows a discourse to move from the private to the public sphere. Finally, some authors point out that the institutional political sphere remains the only space for the production of normative decisions capable of impacting the life of all citizens (Melucci 1989; Darras 1998). We argue that the sociological analysis of politicisation processes should rely on the complementary use of the restrictive and the extensive definitions of politicisation.

This is why we offer an actionist approach to repoliticisation, based on the concept of “subjectivisation”, developed by Alain Touraine and Michel Wieviorka. Subjectivisation is a process in which the individual becomes “Subject” (Touraine 1992). This means that he is able to act for his own freedom by reclaiming the meaning of his actions. In order to achieve this, he must emancipate himself from the metasocial order that hinders his participation in the production of society, as well as from the group he identifies with in the context of the social conflict (Touraine 1984). Therefore, a social movement is characterised by the ability to create “forms of creative action and constructive conflict, inseparable from a democratic vision that recognises everyone's right to be a Subject” (Wieviorka 2019). The concept of subjectivisation allows us to overcome the limits of restrictive and extensive descriptions of politicisation. Indeed, the different indicators of politicisation that we have reviewed are reliable if they imply, for the individual, an awareness of his power to act within the framework of social conflict. Voting, joining a party or having political discussions can only be interpreted as indicators of politicisation if these practices implies the recognition of a social conflict in the political sphere for the actor. Conventional political participation is then interpreted as a means of defending the interests of one's social group in a struggle against another social group for resources and production of society. Similarly, *montée en généralité*, conflictualisation and publicisation of an issue only have concrete effects if it enables the actor to obtain a normative decision in the institutional political sphere. The will to resist in an undemocratic context leads some actors to adopt infra-political practices in order to express themselves politically (Scott 2009). The impossibility for some social groups to defend their interests within the political system is a reason for their participation in a social movement. In all these cases, the actor attempts to act for his own freedom. Therefore, the principles that Alain Touraine applies to social movements can be mobilised in the study of politicisation. Identity, opposition and totality define the capacity for action in the political sphere. The identification with a social group struggling against another social group for the direction of historicity provides a check on the level of politicisation, both in the institutional political sphere and in the context of direct social action. Therefore, the concepts of the sociology of action will be mobilised in this contribution to understand the meaning that the studied actors give to DSA as well as their own interpretation of their identity, their adversary and what is at stake in the social conflict. The concept of subjectivisation will be used to analyse the relation between Potere al Popolo's direct social action and repoliticisation of the social conflict in the *Case del Popolo* of Southern Italy.

3. *Case del Popolo* and Direct Social Action in the *Mezzogiorno*: a Historical Perspective

Potere al Popolo's activists systematically refer to a form of DSA that they call “mutualism”. The latter refers, in the first place, to the practices of mutual aid societies that appeared in the second half of the 19th century in Italy. Mutualistic practices were originally aimed at protecting the members of mutual benefit societies against social risks such as unemployment, illness or invalidity, through the collection of funds based on members' contributions. They were the first forms of social protection in Europe (Launay 2019; Dreyfus 2016). These practices also developed within cooperatives and were linked to workers' and peasants' struggles in the cities and countryside (Bosi and Zamponi 2019). Mutualistic practices then spread within the *Case del Popolo*. The literature about the *Case del Popolo* in the *Mezzogiorno* is relatively limited. This can be explained by the later and less important diffusion of the CDP in this macro-region (Degl'Innocenti 1984, Borelli 2019). Indeed, the wave of diffusion of the *Case del Popolo* in Italy began in the northern part of the country before

spreading, several decades later, but to a lesser extent, in the *Mezzogiorno*. Most studies about the *Case del Popolo* are related to the context of the “red regions”, i.e. the regions of central-northern Italy where the Italian left-wing parties were particularly strong, because the *Case del Popolo* were linked to these parties (DegliInnocenti 1984, Fanelli 2014, Borelli 2019). Before the law of 30th June 1912, only male citizens who were graduates or proficient in reading and writing were allowed to vote. Consequently, access to voting rights for the working classes was limited, as the literacy rate of citizens was very low. In 1880, only 2% of Italian citizens had access to the right to vote (Ciaurro 1977). For this reason, in order to strengthen the electoral participation of the working class, which formed the basis of its electorate, the Italian Socialist Party set up literacy campaigns. Therefore, the need to create spaces that combined recreational and political practices (Ciccio 1903) without depending on property owners and public authorities gave rise to *Case del Popolo*. After the Second World War, the Italian Communist Party aspired to become a mass-based party. In 1957, the Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana⁴ (ARCI) was born with the aim of federating all the organisations that recognised themselves in democratic and anti-fascist values. Until the 1980s, these circles were often linked to the Italian Communist Party (Fanelli 2014, Borelli 2019). The Arci circles thus collaborated with the *Case del Popolo* with the aim of “valorising popular culture and organising the free time of the workers” (Borelli 2019, 47).

Finally, DSA of Potere al Popolo is inspired by the practices experienced in a *Centro Sociale* called the Ex-OPG “Je so' Pazzo” in Naples by the group which gave birth to the movement. *Centro Sociale* is a form of organisation that is particularly spread in Southern Europe (Piazza 2012a). The activists of these organisations were inspired by the mutual aid societies and *Case del Popolo*. However, they differ from them as regards the autonomy and the distance they adopt from the parties of the institutional left (Piazza 2012b). Indeed, the *Centri Sociali* emerged in Italy in the 1970s in a political context marked by bipolarism between the Italian Communist Party and the Christian Democracy, a confessional and conservative party (Cavallaro, Policastro, Salsa and Zanetti 2018). The strategy of the *compromesso storico* (historical compromise) orchestrated by Enrico Berlinguer, General Secretary of the Italian Communist Party, aimed at reaching an agreement with the Christian Democracy in order to allow the participation of socialist and communist forces in the government. This strategy led to a crisis of leftism (Wieviorka 1988) and to a part of the extreme left constructing itself in opposition to representative democracy, which was seen as an instrument of the bourgeoisie, since part of the social demands had no chance of finding a political outlet (Melucci 1989). It is in this context of mistrust towards institutions that the *Centri Sociali*⁵ would embody the extra-parliamentary left in an Italy in transition to post-Fordism (Melucci 1996). It is possible to observe practices common to most of the *Centri Sociali*. On the one hand, their activities are based on voluntary work and exclude any wage logic (Lombardi and Mazzonis 1998). On the other hand, their decision-making process is based on direct democracy and self-managed assemblies (Mudu 2012, Piazza 2012b). The practices born within the *Centro Sociale* Ex-OPG “Je so' Pazzo” have thus inspired the practices of Potere al Popolo’s activists. However, as a political movement intending to act within the institutional political sphere, Potere al Popolo moved away from the tradition of the *Centri Sociali* and decided to rely on a network of *Case del Popolo*. The movement draws on practices that are not new and that have evolved over the course of history. We will define Potere al Popolo's mutualism here as a form of direct social action based on the pooling of resources of a collective actor in order to self-organise free activities aimed at meeting the immediate needs of individuals in a local community and to produce an activation from the beneficiaries.

⁴Italian Recreational and Cultural Association.

⁵ Plural of *Centro Sociale*.

4. Potere al Popolo, from Social Mobilisations to the Political Movement

According to Bosi and Zamponi (2019), the context of a crisis of representation of the left combined with an economic crisis helps to understand the return to the practice of DSA. When the crisis of 2008 broke out, the forces of the radical left, embodied by the Sinistra Arcobaleno alliance, lost their hundred and twenty seats in Parliament. This defeat was interpreted as the result of a distance that had been created between the left and the popular categories affected by the economic crisis. Direct social actions were therefore undertaken with the aim of rebuilding the link between the political institutions and the working classes. During an interview made on 11th November 2020, Salvatore Prinzi, member of the national leadership of Potere al Popolo, describes the path that led to the founding of this political movement as a learning process initiated when he was a teenager in the 1990s. At that time, he was part of a collective composed of about twenty communist militants who were not members of any political party. They thought that the radical leftist parties of the time were helping to reproduce the political system that the group wanted to transform. That is why the collective's political activity took place, first of all, within social mobilisations. According to Salvatore Prinzi, through two university-based movements in 2008 (Onda Anomala) and 2010 (anti-Berlusconian front), the collective followed a path of "accumulation of forces", during which the group was joined by other militants. During an interview made on 13th January 2021, Viola Carofalo, spokesperson of the movement from 2018 to 2021, described how their collective of workers came into contact with other activist groups in Italy:

We called ourselves Clash City Workers [...] we wrote this book called "Dove sono i nostri" [where are our people] [...] to reflect on what had become of the proletariat [...] we didn't really care about the book [...] what interested us was going all over Italy, making presentations and finding other communist groups like us [...] some of these groups are those which have merged into Potere al Popolo [...]. This first acquaintance allowed us to come into contact with comrades who, just like us, lacked a national political subject in which they could recognise themselves, because there were roughly a couple of national political subjects within the radical left, Rifondazione [Party of Communist Refoundation] - which from our point of view had many limitations and did not convince us, because it did not seem to look towards the future - and the reality of the movements linked to the so-called "disobedient area"⁶, which did not convince us neither because it did not acknowledge a class reading [. ...] what we were trying to do was to find a third way that could be an alternative to these two. (I2)

The group that would give birth to Potere al Popolo intended to distance itself not only from the political parties that operate within the political system, but also from the extra-parliamentary left that operate outside this system.

In March 2015, the collective that gave birth to Potere al Popolo occupied the Ex-OPG of Naples. The militants were first faced with the risk of forced evacuation, due to the illegal occupation of the premises but the administration of the Municipality of Naples decided to support the group's occupation of the place. This collective action provided the activists with free headquarters, enabling the material conditions necessary for the organisation of DSA. It also gave the collective the stability it needed to develop its activities in a national context that was repressive against the *Centri Sociali*. Indeed, others CDP of Potere al Popolo were forcibly evacuated such as in Catania and Palermo (I3; I4). This excerpt from the interview with Salvatore Prinzi sheds light on the motives that led the collective to occupy the Ex-OPG:

The OPG is not a social project that comes about by chance, because we found a large structure and occupied it [...]. In reality, it was born with the aim of building a national organisation. During all these years of mobilisation we have been trying to become part of the movement [...] that seeks to make a political proposal. [...] But in 2011 the movement died. We wanted to do like Iglesias [Podemos], to shape ourselves within the movement and then present ourselves as the young generation that produced it and now wanted

⁶ The *disobbedienti* (disobedient) are *Centri Sociali* born in the wake of the mobilisations against the G8 in Genoa in 2001.

to embody its ideas. So we started to build the foundations while waiting for a future movement. The first step was intervention in the territory, so we occupied a large space [...] to do what we had learnt from Greece and Spain: mutualism, solidarity activity, working with marginalised groups in society. (I1)

Indeed, in other European countries, social mobilisations against the austerity policies sometimes lead to the birth of movement parties (Della Porta, Fernández, Kouki and Mosca 2017). For example, in Spain, the 15M movement was institutionalised through the creation of the political movement Podemos. “Post-2010 movements” such as the Arab Spring, Occupy and the 15M, were characterised by their network-based organisational mode, which relied on technology and drew inspiration from each other (Castells, Khosrokhavar and Touraine 2013; Álvarez-Benavides 2016; Pleyers and Glasius 2013). Activists in these movements evolved in the context of globalisation and shared a global identity. They were often directly affected by the effects of the crisis and belonged to a precarious generation (Álvarez-Benavides 2016, Bosi and Zamponi 2019). This is the reason why, on 13th November 2017, the members of the Ex-OPG resorted to social networks. Following an assembly, they published a video on their facebook page, in which they asserted:

We are students, workers, unemployed, [...] we have no prospect of a dignified life, [...] next March we will get to vote and no political force will represent the demands of the majority of the population of this country [...] what we want to say to you, very clearly, is that we want to be candidates. We believe that in this country the time has come to relaunch a strong alternative political project and we know that we are not the only ones foolish enough to think that it is possible. [...] it's about restoring the meaning of the word "democracy", which is no other than “power to the people”⁷.

They thus launched the political movement Potere al Popolo with the aim of allowing the expression of the social groups they wanted to represent inside the political system. The political campaign of 2018 allowed the movement to spread the experience of the Ex-OPG at the national level. The collective published a manual of mutualism in order to spread its practices throughout the country. The *Case del Popolo* are the key spaces of this political strategy. Within two years, thirty-two *Case del Popolo* were created (Potere al Popolo 2020) in a dynamic that differs from the wave of diffusion of CDP in the 19th century, since this time they spread simultaneously all over the country. In Campania, where the movement was born, we have identified eight CDP currently in activity and directly linked to Potere al Popolo.

The following parliamentary elections of march 2018 were characterised by the exclusion of the historical anti-capitalist political forces. Voters' disappointment regarding the austerity policies chosen by Matteo Renzi's Democratic Party was channeled by populist parties (Faggiano, Barbanera, Calò and Mongiardo 2018; Morlino and Raniolo 2017). On the one hand, the League for Salvini Premier, the far-right party headed by Matteo Salvini, registered a historic result (17.4%). In the context of the parliamentary elections of 2018, it adopted a new strategy in order to become a national political actor. For this purpose, it based its communication on its opposition to the European Union and on a criminalisation of migrants and NGOs operating in the Mediterranean, in the context of migration flows between Africa and the European Union (Anselmi and De Nardis 2018). The “red regions” of the Centre-North, such as Tuscany and Emilia-Romagna, where the Democratic Party was historically rooted, were largely conquered by the right-wing coalition. On the other hand, the 2018 general elections were a success for the Five Star Movement, founded by the humorist Beppe Grillo. The salient features that characterise the movement are its presentation as anti-system and outside the traditional polarisation between left and right. The main target of the party was the political “caste” and its high incomes (Ivaldi, Lanzone and Woods 2017). In 2018, the Five Star Movement proved to hold a large majority in the *Mezzogiorno*. Beyond this North-South polarisation, it should be noted that the working classes and the unemployed voted more in favour of the League and the Five Star Movement, while the wealthy classes expressed a majority in favour of the Democratic Party (Cavallaro et al. 2018, De Sio 2018). In this context, Potere al Popolo tried to propose an anti-capitalist alternative in a united movement. Following its candidacy in the 2018 parliamentary elections, the movement obtained about 1%. This is a low result, but it would be

⁷ This quote was translated from Italian to English by the author.

difficult to analyse the effectiveness of Potere al Popolo's politic strategy on the basis of these elections, as the party was born just three months before. Most of the militants interviewed interpret these elections as an opportunity for many Italian activist collectives to unite within Potere al Popolo. This enabled the creation of a national network of *Casa del Popolo*, that collaborated at the local level through direct social action but also through conventional political action and demonstrative action (I5). These elections were also the occasion for Potere al Popolo to communicate its political project on a national level. However, in October 2018, it faced a split during the vote on the party's status that led to the abandonment of the organisation by the Communist Refoundation Party, Anticapitalist Left and the Party of the South (Comitato Politico Nazionale di Rifondazione Comunista 2018; Direzione Nazionale di Sinistra Anticapitalista 2018; Consiglio Direttivo Nazionale Partito del Sud 2018).

Following its governmental cohabitation with the League, the Five Star Movement lost popularity. This was revealed by relatively weak election results, notably in the 2019 European elections. In the context of the second Conte government between 5th September 2019 and 13th February 2021, Giorgia Meloni's far-right party called Fratelli d'Italia (Brothers of Italy), a descendant of the Italian Social Movement founded by post-war fascist militants, appeared to be a new emerging party that polls credited with 14% (SWG 2020). Finally, the first Draghi government, which has been in office since 13 February 2021, is a coalition formed by many parties, which belong to different traditions. Indeed, there are centre-left parties such as the Democratic Party or Italia Viva, the new party of Matteo Renzi, but also populist parties such as the Five Star Movement or the League. In this context, radical left-wing parties seem to be crowded out of the political scene (SWG 2021).

5. The Meaning of Potere al Popolo's Direct Social Action in Southern Italy

For the militants of Potere al Popolo, political activity and DSA are complementary and most activists get involved in both forms of action (I7). Firstly, DSA is a way for militants to connect with people they would never have met otherwise. It allows them to identify the needs and interests of a community through field research. The aim is to focus political and social activities on daily local issues. For example, in Salerno, the *Casa del Popolo* decided to organise free medical assistance and legal advice to migrants. According to Michele⁸, a young activist who manages the communication of this group:

There are strata of the population, in Salerno in particular, who do not know their most basic rights regarding health. They don't know how to make an appointment with a specialist. There are also migrants, who, on the one hand, do not know their rights, and on the other hand, do not have documentation. This is why it is important to put them in contact with health professionals thanks to our contact network. (I8)

According to an ISTAT report, Italy is affected by a high rate of illegal employment. Calabria is the most concerned with 22,3% undeclared workers. In addition, more than one in five workers in agriculture are working illegally in Italy (ISTAT 2019b). Therefore, in the Calabrian city of Villa San Giovanni, the activists of the *Casa del Popolo* "Nuvola Rossa" attach particular importance to migrants' and agricultural workers' rights struggles (I9).

Secondly, DSA in the *Mezzogiorno* is not intended to offer only a short-term response to the difficulty of access to fundamental rights. This form of action is a way to spread civic knowledge. In the Ex-OPG of Naples, a group of activists created the Popular Labour Exchange to defend workers' rights. Voluntary lawyers work free of charge to study the individual situations and inform workers about the steps they can take. Likewise, the Migrants and Refugees Movement of Naples was born at the Ex-OPG in order to defend migrants' rights. The practices of these groups are based on both DSA and demonstrative action. For example, activists created a Migrants Desk with the aim of helping migrants to understand the legal procedures to obtain a temporary residence permit, the resident status in the city they live in, and access to international protection practices. On the other hand, they regularly organise protests against the policies of public institutions regarding the

⁸ Name changed to protect privacy.

management of migration flows and the living conditions of migrants. The activists of the Ex-OPG also created a Popular Ambulatory to inform people about their health rights. For example, in the Gynecology Desk, volunteer doctors perform ultrasounds and inform patients about contraception (Ex-OPG “Je so’ Pazzo” 2018, 35-44). In the *Mezzogiorno*, civic knowledge brings to light the contradiction between the fundamental rights enshrined in the Italian Constitution and the situation of limited citizenship of the inhabitants of Southern Italy.

Thirdly, DSA aim to spread the idea that in a given situation, solidarity and collective action can improve the life of each individual. According to Maria⁹, a young activist of the Popular Labour Exchange of Naples:

Mutualism allows you to connect with an audience that is mostly not made up of people who are like you [...]. We know that this does not immediately translate into political affiliation. It's not that people are not aware [...] many workers know very well that they are being exploited. They don't need anyone to come and tell them. The problem is to understand how much we want to resist and fight together. (I10)

The goal of Potere al Popolo's activists is to build local communities based on strong social bonds. Bosi and Zamponi (2019) offered an analysis of the different paths that lead collective actors to DSA. According to the authors, the activists that gave birth to Potere al Popolo followed a “social-political path”. They interpret the weakening of mobilisation as the result of a social desegregation resulting from the multiform crisis that erupted in 2008. This deterioration of social ties led to the isolation of individuals and weakened political participation in its various forms (Bosi and Zamponi 2019, 174). Therefore, their aim is to reconstruct a “political subject” through the rematerialisation and reterritorialisation of collective action (Bosi and Zamponi 2019, 173, 176). According to Arturo¹⁰, a young activist that worked at the after-school of the Ex-OPG, this political meaning of Potere al Popolo's DSA is not always easy to understand for the beneficiaries:

It is difficult to make people understand that what we do is not volunteering but mutualism so we try to involve parents in extra-curricular activities, such as the Carnival of Scampia, [...] or when the protests of the Whirlpool workers took place in Naples, together with the comrades of the Popular Ambulatory, we took care of the children on the days when the workers brought them to the protests [...]. Whenever possible, we look for political connections between every day's routine and the other moments of life [like protests]. (I11)

Finally, the challenge of Potere al Popolo as a political organisation is to convince the social groups they wish to represent, i.e. the middle classes and the working classes, to support the political project of the organisation. According to Salvatore Prinzi, the aim of Potere al Popolo is to build a singular type of activist and a “conscious people” to prepare the “conditions for a revolutionary break” and be ready for “historic opportunities”. Mario¹¹, a young activist from the *Casa del Popolo* of Nocera Inferiore in Campania, explains that DSA is also used for political purposes:

As we are a new party, we have to grow, but we can't because we are not in the government and we don't have the media on our side [...]. The only ways left are interacting face-to-face, doing things on the territory, making people understand what we do in a small group at the territorial level, then in the opposition, in the administration... it's a very long process. (I5)

Potere al Popolo's strategy can be summed up in this sentence from Salvatore Prinzi's speech in the context of the Potere al Popolo Camp 2018: “if you exist in society, you will exist in Parliament. This is the cultural break we have brought to this country”. According to Francesco, a young activist of Potere al Popolo Taranto, this is the reason why the future struggles of the movement should take place in Southern Italy:

⁹ Name changed to protect privacy.

¹⁰ Name changed to protect privacy.

¹¹ Name changed to protect privacy.

For me, it's in the South that the next big battles of a radical left like ours will be played out, [...] [it's in the South] that you have a space for aggregation, if you're able to enter a contradictory context where you can't show up with your flag and say "I'm the communist who protects the workers" and that's it because people will never follow you. [...] Starting from the territory, you have to understand which operation can work best and you have to put yourself in play at the political level. (I12)

These data confirm Bosi and Zamponi's analysis (2019) who demonstrate that since the birth of the political movement, Potere al Popolo's activists faced typical issues of the "political path", which implies that they also use DSA in order to strengthen their political action. In the next part of this contribution, we will analyse the political effects of Potere al Popolo's DSA.

6. The Political Effects of Direct Social Action in the *Case del Popolo*

Potere al Popolo's DSA is always associated with political claims. Firstly, DSA allows the activists to acquire knowledge and skills that they mobilise in other forms of action, such as conventional political action and demonstrative action. Alessia¹², a young activist of the Popular Labour Exchange of Naples, discovered the Ex-OPG in 2015. She affirms that she had never been involved in political militancy or associational activity before. Quickly, she became the manager of the Popular Labour Exchange.

I learned how to read a pay slip or access unemployment benefits. We learned it together through self-study courses. I had never studied these things at University [...] I learned it at the Popular Labour Exchange. I learned how to be a lawyer in activism, [...] I learned how to write a formal notice, I learned how to appeal [...]. During the election campaigns I learned to speak in public [...] it was something that caused me a lot of anxiety, it embarrassed me, I don't like to expose myself too much publicly so it was an obstacle to face. I learned to answer a lot of questions as well because people need answers. (I7)

Secondly, skills and knowledge that activists acquire through DSA are resources that *Case del Popolo* can network. DSA allows for collaboration between activists from different groups. Indeed, activists often talk about their collaboration with other *Case del Popolo*, especially when they need to call on the skills of activists from another Potere al Popolo's group because they are experiencing difficulties (I5; I10). This allows for a continuous exchange of knowledge. In the case of a mobilisation against water privatisation in her municipality, Erminia, a young activist of the *Casa del Popolo* of Nocera Inferiore, explains how DSA enables collaboration and networking:

We have continued our battle [against the privatisation of water] in the territory of Nocera, but as this issue currently applies to the whole of the national territory [...] we have shared our knowledge with another *Casa del Popolo* that is fighting in its territory, we have gone to support it in the other town where they are trying to privatise it [water]. In this sense there is a continuous exchange with the other *Casa del Popolo* and a development of the movement. Beyond the knowledge we have, forming a network and exchanging knowledge is a fundamental thing that has been missing for a long time. (I13)

DSA allows activist groups to network, exchange experiences and inspire each other. For example, in Catania, the activists of the *Casa del Popolo* "Colapesce" created a Migrants' Desk on the Ex-OPG's model. DSA also produces collaborations with collective actors outside Potere al Popolo's network. For example, in Palermo, on the occasion of the Gay Pride, the activists decided to take part in the parade and to create their float.

¹² Name changed to protect privacy.

Martina¹³, a young activist of the *Casa del Popolo* of Palermo tells how this led to a collaboration with the Palermo Pride collective:

We sent messages on social networks to say that anyone who wanted to help decorate a float for the Gay Pride would be welcome [...] a lot of people came to prepare the decorations, to play music, to choose playlists, to buy clothes, rainbow headbands and so on. This opened a very important dialogue with the Pride, in the sense that we became part of the management of the practical aspects of Palermo Pride. (I4)

Thirdly, DSA sometimes produces an activation from people who have benefited from it. The Popular Labour exchange was inaugurated on 1st May 2015 and during the first 14 months, more than 30 workers went there to seek the help of lawyers (Ex-OPG “Je so’ Pazzo” 2016). Various campaigns against undeclared work were launched and led, sometimes after several years of struggle, to the trials and convictions of several employers, including one of the most touristic archaeological sites in the city of Naples (Redazione ANSA 2019). According to Arturo, the politicisation effects of DSA are not automatic and some DSA practices work better than others. For example, the Migrants and Refugees Movement of Naples managed to organise important demonstrative actions in the city:

Many migrant comrades started to think and inform themselves politically after they entered the Ex-OPG for the first time as asylum seekers or for international protection [...]. After attending the Ex-OPG, they started to do political activism. They are on the front line in demonstrations, they are the ones who form the Ex-OPG delegation that meets with the Prefect or the Mayor to obtain what should be their rights in an ideal world. (I11)

Some migrants have also got involved in the political activity of *Potere al Popolo* by becoming, for example, spokespersons for the Migrants and Refugees Movement of Naples. During our field research, we sometimes noticed important mobilisations for migrants' rights in Naples that were organised by *Potere al Popolo*.

Fourthly, the choice of collective action is intended to fulfill internal and external objectives (Della Porta and Diani 1997). It allows the actor to be identified by his or her community of reference but also by external collective actors. According to Melucci (1989), collective identity implies that a collective actor controls the effects of its own action. The interviews collected in the CDP show that the activists of *Potere al Popolo* often share the same view on their identity and their class adversary. They define themselves as social groups deprived of economic and social resources and often affirm their adherence to communist political culture. They also define their adversary by referring to the economic model, i.e. capitalism or liberalism (I1; I8; I14). Some call the social group that holds the resources they feel deprived of by the name of “bourgeoisie”. They evoke multinationals guilty of tax evasion and mass layoffs or the local petty bourgeoisie which uses undeclared labour and exploits workers without allowing them to access labour rights protection (I1). The activists here often refer to Marxist concepts. Therefore, *Potere al Popolo*'s DSA could allow the movement to spread a political culture, based on a common project aimed at defending the interests of social groups affected by the crisis and welfare retrenchment. However, the activists we interviewed often share the same specific social and cultural characteristics. Indeed, in most cases, they have at least a university degree, they identify with the marxist culture and their standard of living is low compared to their level of qualification. For example, the activists interviewed are mostly young graduates who have a “bread-and-butter” job, precarious PhD. students or university lecturers and researchers. At the political level, the current challenge for *Potere al Popolo* is to find an effective strategy to get also other social and cultural groups to join its project. Indeed, the movement not only addresses to individuals who have a university degree and who identify with the student counterculture inherited from the *Centri Sociali* of the 1990s (Ex-OPG “Je so’ Pazzo” 2018, 16). *Potere al Popolo* also want to convince the working classes who voted mostly for the League and for the Five

¹³ Name changed to protect privacy

Stars Movement in the 2018 parliamentary elections. For the moment, we did not observe a massive adhesion of individuals belonging to these social groups thanks to Potere al Popolo's DSA in the *Case del Popolo*.

Finally, DSA practices in the *Mezzogiorno* make it possible for citizen who are suffering from the effects of the economic crisis not to enter into a discouragement dynamic. They are aware of the contradictions between the rights formally declared in the Italian Constitution and the situation of limited citizenship as a southerner. They want to contrast the effect of the crisis in the short term and produce social transformations in the long term. In this context, DSA is a way to produce concrete and local changes. During an interview, Elena, a young activist of the *Casa del Popolo* "Colapesce" of Catania described how DSA allows her to put into practice her vision of a fairer society:

Sometimes you read a lot of books, a lot of theory, but you don't manage to put your thinking into practice. On the contrary, political activity allows you to do it, it allows you to manage a desk, to deal with a pandemic by helping people, to lead assemblies, to make the right interventions at the right time [...] to be willing to question your own theories, your own ideas, for a more collective thought. (I3)

DSA aims to demonstrate the possibility to contrast the limited citizenship situation of Southern Italy's inhabitants because if a group of activists managed to resolve some local issues with no economic resources, it proves that public institutions should do a lot better. In addition, in the lack of major social mobilisations, DSA maintains cohesion among activists and allows the territorial networks of Potere al Popolo to remain active. According to Elena, DSA requires to "stay aware of the dynamics of the city, of the country, you have to try to be inside to succeed in understanding and thinking about how to act". Moreover, during periods of low political activity, this form of action can prevent a group from breaking up:

We organised Cineforum [film forums] during the summer to avoid breaking up as a group, to recruit new activists, and also because after an election campaign, activities are less intense for a while, you have to rest a little bit. (I5)

During some phases of the Covid-19 pandemic that spread at the beginning of 2019 in Italy, some of Potere al Popolo's mutualist activities were interrupted or modified, in order to comply with regulations imposed by the public authorities. However, activists sometimes found a way to stay active. For example, at the Ex-OPG, the militants organised the distribution of free food packages to people affected by the social and economic consequences of the pandemic (I1). Therefore, as Bosi and Zamponi demonstrated (2019), DSA is a way for activists to resist the effects of the Italian multiform crisis. DSA also aims to develop a network of activists while waiting for greater political opportunities such as massive social mobilisations.

The different effects of DSA in the *Mezzogiorno* that we have reviewed in this section could contribute to the repoliticisation of the participants. We can now offer an ideal-typical synthesis of repoliticisation through DSA:

- DSA in the *Case del Popolo* produces the acquisition of civic and political knowledge by the militant or beneficiary.
- It enables the participant to develop individual abilities and to mobilise them in the context of the collective actions of Potere al Popolo. The exchange of information and the collaboration of activists within the CDP allows them to develop a capacity for networked collective action.
- DSA contrasts the effects of depoliticisation because it allows the activists to reaffirm the plurality of existing choices regarding public policies and the responsibility of political institutions concerning the situation in the *Mezzogiorno*.
- DSA produces an awareness of a collective identity, an adversary and what is at stake in the social conflict.

These different effects are complementary and trigger a process of subjectivisation through which the Subject fosters the desire to participate freely in the production of society. This process leads him to defend the interests of the social group he identifies with by participating inside and/or outside the political system.

7. Discussion and Conclusions

The Italian political context is characterised by the weakening of the left-wing parties which do not seem to convince the working classes. The austerity policies carried out by successive governments and the impossibility for certain social groups to express their interests within the political system have created a mistrust of public institutions among citizens. This is reflected in an increase in electoral abstention and the rise of populist parties. In the *Mezzogiorno*, the social effects of the 2008 crisis are greater than in the rest of the country. The limited citizenship situation of the southern inhabitants increases the distance between citizens and the political sphere.

In this context, Potere al Popolo chose DSA to produce social and political effects. On the one hand, DSA in the *Mezzogiorno* aims to respond to the immediate needs of citizens in a context of limited citizenship due to the delay of the expansion of public service. However, this form of action is not considered as a form of welfarism. The purpose of Potere al Popolo is to produce an activation of the beneficiaries of DSA. In a logic of reciprocity, DSA aims to rebuild social links in a context of social disintegration and isolation of individuals affected by the economic crisis. Potere al Popolo intends to produce solidarity between individuals in a local community. As Bosi and Zamponi demonstrate (2019), for the activists, this is a basic condition to produce political activation. However, DSA is also intended as a way for activists to connect with Potere al Popolo's potential electorate in the absence of significant financial resources and media coverage.

In this context, *Case del Popolo* collaborate as a network in which information and experiences are exchanged. The activists of Potere al Popolo dialogue and sometimes collaborate with other collective actors. Like "post-2010 movements", they are network-based and inspired by other activists in a global level (Pleyers and Glasius 2013). DSA sometimes produces an activation of the beneficiaries. Knowing their rights and duties in the context of the *Mezzogiorno* is a condition for individuals to reaffirm their citizenship through different forms of collective action. This can lead to a development dynamic of individual and collective political abilities. DSA could allow the activists to identify with a social group struggling against another social group for the direction of historicity. According to Touraine (1965), this is a condition to generate a social movement.

However, the activists we met during our field research were mainly precarious young adults who have at least one university degree. We have demonstrated that the new *Case del Popolo* in Southern Italy could be considered as hubs for repoliticisation only with this specific sociocultural group.

We have proposed an actionist approach to repoliticisation based on the concept of subjectivisation. In this theoretical framework, repoliticisation implies the possibility for the actor to express himself as a Subject. This means to emancipate both from the social order and from the group of activists he identifies with in the context of the social conflict. Therefore, if the internal dynamics within the *Case del Popolo* of Potere al Popolo did not allow the process of subjectivisation to take place, we would conclude that this could not lead to a repoliticisation of the actors. Indeed, the definition of repoliticisation that we have proposed in this contribution implies the expression of the Subject within the political sphere and leads to the empowerment of the activists. If sectarian dynamics hinders the expression of internal differentiations and leads to the objectification of activists in the service of a political project, a process of desubjectivisation could be observed and lead to depoliticisation.

Finally, DSA is a way for militants to fight against the discouragement linked to depoliticisation and absence of future perspectives in the *Mezzogiorno*. For this reason, DSA is a consequence of repoliticisation

because it can lead repoliticised individuals to put into practice their desire for a fairer society. However, DSA is also a cause of repoliticisation because it can entail an activation of beneficiaries.

The actionist approach to politicisation allows us to go beyond the limits of restrictive and extensive definitions of politicisation (Aït-Aoudia et al. 2011), by relating indicators of politicisation to the actionalist concept of subjectivisation. We have showed that repoliticisation implies a desire for emancipation that leads the single actors to acquire the knowledge and abilities necessary to emancipate and defend their individual and collective interest. For this reason, repoliticisation can lead the Subject to act inside and outside the political system in order to participate in the production of society. Therefore, we affirm that subjectivisation is a major condition for repoliticisation. This concept should be systematically mobilised to verify the relevance of other indicators of politicisation.

Furthermore, we have demonstrated that Potere al Popolo's DSA is always associated with political claims and that the concepts of the actionalist theory such as identity, adversary and totality, can be applied with DSA, demonstrative action and conventional political action to provide a check on the level of politicisation. This is why, we share Lorenzo Zamponi's position (2017) to integrate these forms of collective action in a single repertoire. We suggest to go beyond the scientific compartmentalisation to study repoliticisation processes as the different forms of political participation inside and outside the political system are complementary.

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Interviews

- I1 Interview to Salvatore Prinzi, leadership of Potere al Popolo, online, 11/11/2020.
- I2 Interview to Viola Carofalo, National Spokesperson of Potere al Popolo, online, 13/01/2021.
- I3 Interview to activist of Casa del Popolo "Colapesce" di Catania, online, 31/03/2021.
- I4 Interview to activist of Casa del Popolo di Palermo, online, 23/02/2021.
- I5 Interview to activist of Casa del Popolo "Cohiba" di Nocera Inferiore, online, 18/03/2021.
- I6 Interview to member of Partito della Rifondazione Comunista, online, 31/10/2020.
- I7 Interview to activist of Popular Labour Exchange, Ex-OPG di Napoli, online, 09/03/2021.
- I8 Interview to activist of Casa del Popolo di Salerno, online, 19/12/2019.
- I9 Interview to activist of Casa del Popolo "Nuvola Rossa" di San Giovanni, 27/04/2020.
- I10 Interview to activist of Popular Labour Exchange, Ex-OPG di Napoli, online, 17/03/2021.
- I11 Interview to activist of Doposcuola Popolare, Ex-OPG di Napoli, online, 16/01/2021
- I12 Interview to activist of Potere al Popolo Taranto, online, 08/03/2021
- I13 Interview to activist of Casa del Popolo "Cohiba" di Nocera Inferiore, online, 19/03/2021
- I14 Interview to activist of Potere al Popolo, telephone interview, 24/10/2020

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