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## Conciliating Subaltern and Liminal Geopolitics: Reggio Emilia's City Diplomacy and the Geographies of Lusophone Africa's Decolonisation

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### ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the story of a generous popular mobilisation that made possible a peculiar experience of transnational cooperation since the early 1970s. That is, the campaigns in solidarity with Mozambican anticolonial resistance that made the small town of Reggio Emilia (Italy) a key place in the processes of Lusophone Africa decolonisation, to the point that an often-told anecdote reports that many Mozambican people sympathetic with anti-colonialist organisation Frelimo believed that Reggio Emilia was the 'capital' of Italy. Indeed, it was mostly from the Emilian town that concrete aid arrived from Italy to Frelimo's clandestine guerrilla bases between Tanzania and Northern Mozambique. Based on the exceptional archives surviving in Reggio, which abundantly document the Reggio-Africa solidarity experience showing that it was not limited to Mozambique, and on original interviews with surviving protagonists, this paper extends and connects for the first time literature on city diplomacy with scholarship on critical, subaltern and liminal geopolitics of decolonisation. I especially argue for giving more consideration to a 'radical city diplomacy', which provides examples for constructing geopolitical challenges from below to the state and the territorial models that have dominated mainstream geopolitics hitherto.

This paper addresses a little-known but quite exceptional case of subaltern city diplomacy. That is, the role that the small town of Reggio Emilia, a historical cradle of municipal socialism, played in supporting the liberation struggle of Lusophone Africa anticolonial guerrilla, namely Frelimo (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*), with special emphasis on the 1970–1975 period. While this experience owed much to the tenacious and voluntaristic work of an individual, Communist local administrator Giuseppe Soncini (1926–1991), its archives reveal the complex interactions between the transnational networks and multiple geographies that characterised twentieth-century decolonisation movements (Craggs and Neate 2023; Davies 2019) and the popular enthusiasm and mobilisation of grassroots activists beyond formal politics.

Federico Ferretti, 2024 "Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia's city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa's decolonization" **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

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## **Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization**

**Abstract:** *This paper discusses the story of a generous popular mobilisation that made possible a peculiar experience of transnational cooperation since the early 1970s. That is, the campaigns in solidarity with Mozambican anticolonial resistance that made the small town of Reggio Emilia (Italy) a key place in the processes of Lusophone Africa decolonization, to the point that an often-told anecdote reports that many Mozambican people sympathetic with anti-colonialist organisation Frelimo believed that Reggio Emilia was the ‘capital’ of Italy. Indeed, it was mostly from the Emilian town that concrete aid arrived from Italy to Frelimo’s clandestine guerrilla bases between Tanzania and Northern Mozambique. Based on the exceptional archives surviving in Reggio, which abundantly document the Reggio-Africa solidarity experience showing that it was not limited to Mozambique, and on original interviews with surviving protagonists, this paper extends and connects for the first time literature on city diplomacy with scholarship on critical, subaltern and liminal geopolitics of decolonization. I especially argue for giving more consideration to a ‘radical city diplomacy’, which provides examples for constructing geopolitical challenges from below to the state and the territorial models that have dominated mainstream geopolitics hitherto.*

**Keywords:** Subaltern Diplomacy; Critical Geopolitics; Liminality and Subalternity; Geographies of Decolonization; City Agency

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

This paper addresses a little-known but quite exceptional case of subaltern city diplomacy. That is, the role that the small town of Reggio Emilia, a historical cradle of municipal socialism, played in supporting the liberation struggle of Lusophone Africa anticolonial guerrilla, namely Frelimo (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*), with special emphasis on the 1970-1975 period. While this experience owed much to the tenacious and voluntaristic work of an individual, Communist local administrator Giuseppe Soncini (1926-1991), its archives reveal the complex interactions between the transnational networks and multiple geographies that characterised twentieth-century decolonisation movements (Craggs and Neate 2023; Davies 2019) and the popular enthusiasm and mobilisation of grassroots activists beyond formal politics.

This experience symbolically started with an act that, although provided with formal ‘diplomatic’ attributes, went beyond all the rules of diplomacy and international relations: a twinning that was established by the Reggio Emilia main hospital *Arcispedale Santa Maria Nuova* (hereafter *Arcispedale*) then directed by Soncini, and the ‘Central Hospital’ in Cabo Delgado (Mozambique) on 16 July 1970. This latter was a clandestine structure lacking any institutional setup, defined ‘a mobile structure in the jungle’ (Reggio Emilia, Istoreco, Reggio-Africa Archive [hereafter Istoreco], Folder 5, Pink Pages [hereafter PP], 10 March 1971), serving Frelimo’s guerrillas in their fight against the Portuguese army from the freed zones of Northern Mozambique. This twinning inspired debates raising intriguing matters on subaltern and liminal geopolitics also because, before 1975 Mozambican independence, everything occurred in a little-defined legal or institutional framework, which triggered diplomatic incidents (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 10 March 1971). In addition to dealing directly with foreign politics, Reggio administrators went personally to visit guerrilla zones entering clandestinely Mozambique, a formal colony of a country, Portugal, that was Italy’s partner within NATO.

A former fighter in the antifascist 1943-45 Resistance with the 145<sup>th</sup> Garibaldi partisan brigade, Soncini was a manual worker and activist who acquired formal education thanks to a sojourn of 4 years in the USSR, where he was invited as a member of the Italian Communist Party (PCI),

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

becoming then a journalist and a local administrator (Lanzafame, Podaliri and Moreni 2013). Head of the *Arcispedale* on behalf of PCI-led local administration, Soncini personally redacted a special supplement of the *Arcispedale* bulletin, cyclostyled on pink paper and therefore known as ‘The Pink Pages’ (1970-1975) (Ganapini 2023) dedicated to Mozambique and other anticolonial struggles ongoing. Sent ‘all across Europe’ (Reggio Emilia, Panizzi Library, Soncini-Ganapini Archive [hereafter SGA], Folder 3, Interview to Giuseppe Soncini by Lucia Zanetti, 1981), the Pink Pages served both local and international communication for Reggio-Africa solidarity. This meant sending healthcare and logistic aid to Frelimo, hosting wounded guerrillas and training healthcare personnel, to the point that Frelimo leader and future President of Mozambique Samora Machel (1933-1986) defined Reggio as: ‘Frelimo’s safe rearguard’ (Ganapini 2023).

Addressing the Reggio-Africa case, this paper extends and connects for the first time scholarship on ‘city diplomacy’ with the broad field of critical, liminal and subaltern geopolitics, especially referred to anticolonialism and decolonisation. My argument is twofold. First, Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy of decolonisation shows the effectiveness of grassroots and voluntaristic mobilisation in promoting action from below to influence wider politics and to radicalise ‘city diplomacy’. In discussing this radicalisation, I especially contend that the approaches that are currently called ‘subaltern’ and ‘liminal’ geopolitics are not mutually exclusive and can meet, being complementary in the analysis of specific cases such as Reggio-Africa. Second, the postcolonial follow-up of this experience, ridden by contrasts triggered by Cold War logics after that independent Mozambique joined the Soviet bloc, contains lessons for current debates on decolonisation considering the geopolitical articulation between what Hannah Arendt called constitutive and constituted power as phases of any revolution (Minca 2019). The latter resulted in the ‘cloud of disappointment’ (Craggs 2014, 40) that followed several experiences in decolonisation, which remains unfinished business also in current African geographies (Daley and Murrey 2022). Thus, critical geopolitics’ critiques to state territorialities should consistently question all oppressive powers, including those that are reconstituted after the end of colonial dominations or authoritarian regimes.

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

Methodologically, this implies paying attention to individuals, assemblages, grassroots practices and people out of the record. To this end, I extend and put in communication subaltern and liminal geopolitics, which are both based on margins, ambivalences and consideration for non-state actors. Following ‘liminal’ literature on diplomacy assemblages, historical approaches are needed and primary sources welcome (Dittmer 2017; McConnell 2017; McConnell and Dittmer 2018): therefore, this paper is based on original research work on rich archives surviving in Reggio. The first, the Reggio-Africa archive held at *Istoreco* (Historical Institute for the Study of Resistance and Contemporary Society), contains 93 folders from various institutional repositories of the *Arcispedale* and the Municipality of Reggio Emilia. *Istoreco* also holds the archives of Dina Forti (1915-2015), anticolonial activist who supported Reggio-Africa from Rome (Chiodo-Karpinsky 2008). The second, the Soncini-Ganapini archive at the Municipal Library of Reggio Emilia, contains over 250 folders of Reggio-Africa documentation including Soncini’s correspondence, first ordered by the late Soncini and then by his wife, Communist activist Bruna Ganapini (Lanzafame Podaliri and Moreni 2013). These archives were built following a declared political intentionality, that is claiming the memory and worthiness of an experience that ended in a bitter way amidst allegations of corruption—finally proved false by the tribunals as I detail below (Istoreco, Folder 33, Press Review 1986).

Thus, these collections contribute to build alternative archives of radicalism and decolonisation as discussed by geographies of internationalism (Hodder, Heffernan and Legg 2021) and should be read in their relational connections with other archives accounting for transnational networks (Alberani 2019). Here, I especially analyse Soncini’s correspondence, and the Pink Pages, as sources that respond to the need of reconstructing local and transnational complex networks, following a well-established methodology in histories and geographies of African decolonisation (Craggs and Neate 2023; Ferretti 2021a; Gomes 2010; Hodder 2016; Tornimbeni 2022). Additionally, I realised two interviews based on the qualitative model of ‘elite interviews’ (Harvey 2011) with local activists that contributed to the Reggio-Africa experience, namely the

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

aforementioned Bruna Ganapini and former PCI functionary Ivano Azzali. Their memories highlight the importance of popular mobilisation and of making ‘history from below’ (Samuel 1994) to understand these experiences of unorthodox ‘city diplomacy’.

In the first part, I discuss how the meeting of city diplomacy and critical geopolitics can be fostered by connecting liminal and subaltern geopolitics. In the second part, I discuss the Reggio case based on the exceptional documentation surviving. In the third part, I analyse this experience through the memories of the interviewed activists. In the fourth part, I discuss the new issues that African ‘constitutional decolonization’ (Craggs and Neate 2023, 4) left open, and the possible avenues for further debates.

### **City diplomacy and critical geopolitics**

Following classical works that exposed the increasing importance of cities in global economy (Harvey 1989; Sassen 1991), scholars started to reflect on political and consciously oriented city agency including ‘urban diplomacy’ (Acuto 2020, 337). As Ian Klaus notes: ‘Over the past two decades, mayors and city governments have risen an influence on the global stage. Urban perspectives are now commonplace at major multilateral meetings and international negotiations’ (Klaus 2022, 61). Yet, most literature on ‘city diplomacy’, or ‘paradiplomacy’ (Mamadouh and Van der Wusten 2016), mainly addresses cities’ commercial branding following neo-liberal models, or alternatively their commitment to some progressive agendas in terms of ecology, sustainability or migration (Stürner-Siovitiz 2022). Despite relevant attempts to connect activist civil society to ‘the proactive and contentious role of cities’ (Alagna 2023, 1), the roles of bottom-up mobilisation appear to be strongly conditioned by institutional setups. Municipal politics often target pragmatic governance implementation rather than radical solutions to broader societal and political matters, which affects also the most ‘critical’ circuits such as the Fearless Cities (Russell 2019).

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

According to Klaus, municipal leaders generally: ‘Do not seek city-states. They are not revolting within their national systems or the international order in place. They seek policy implementation and action’ (Klaus 2022, 63). Some cases, like that of Johannesburg discussed by Ikome and Tladi, show the possibility of moving city politics in plural and sometimes dissident directions: ‘The mainstream literature on global cities tends to explain the internationalization of cities almost exclusively from the perspective of recent developments in global capitalism ... Little academic attention has been given to the domestic contexts within which city governments develop and exercise their international agency’ (Ikome and Tladi 2023, 137). Yet, much of these accomplishments remain ‘ephemeral’ (Ikome and Tladi 2023, 156), due to changes of administration, government or international setups. Even at the EU level, attempts to get more influence for cities seem to depend rather on multilevel governance delegated by member states than on autonomous local agency for changing things (Mamadouh 2018).

While respected geopolitical scholarship argues that city agency can ‘destabilize state-centred geopolitical imaginations’ (Moisio 2018, 1421), these ideas are generally associated with city-regions, or megacities, although scholars acknowledge that cities’ agency exceeds their mere dimensions or regional power (Brenner 2004). Yet, most studies link cities’ capacity to intervene in foreign affairs to the increasing dimensions of some megacities, city regions and city networks, and to the growing weight of urban population in global demography (Amiri and Sevin 2020). Small cities are mainly considered for roles such as heritage sites or cultural capitals, and generally struggle to go beyond petty interests such as attracting tourism (Clerc 2020). So far, ‘most research has focused on major cities and eye-catching city networks’, establishing ‘a clear tendency towards “metrocentricity” in the city diplomacy literature’ (Koelemaij and Derudder 2022, 435) that recent scholarship try to correct by associating city diplomacy to the era of ‘municipal socialism’ and ‘bottom-up localism’ (Koelemaij and Derudder 2022, 437). There is also a tendency to consider the (although heterogeneous) phenomenon of city diplomacy as relatively recent (Klaus 2022; Koelemaij, Taveirne and Derudder, 2023; Moisio 2018).

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>



Here, I stress the need for a new radical city geopolitics to overtake the realm of ‘urban entrepreneurialism’ (Phelps and Miao 2020, 305). While ‘entrepreneurialism’ can mean disparate things in current urban policies, rare voices criticise ‘the urbanisation of the predatory, extractivist nature of capitalist economies’ (Rossi and Wang 2020, 484). Even when its actors take critical approaches, city diplomacy is often developed in neoliberal contexts, conditioned by commodification logics for the ‘promotion of cities ... similar to those of the local invention and innovation exploited internationally as urban speculation’ (Phelps and Miao 2020, 317). As Acuto rightly notes: ‘Only by taking into account the interdisciplinary encounter of geography and politics ... qualifying urban (or city) diplomacy, can we grasp the fundamental reconfigurations of urban governance these varieties are prompting’ (Acuto 2020, 336). Here, I consider urban centres (including small towns) as contexts that provide occasions for participation, stressing popular agency from below rather than the mere interactions between cities and different levels of governance.

My case is inserted in the long and complex history of Italian traditions of municipalism as self-government (Ferretti 2022) and later municipal socialism, which allow both overtaking the aforementioned entrepreneurial logics and considering small cities’ subaltern geopolitics as a factor that further complicates the scales of geopolitical analysis. The Reggio-Africa experience adds to city diplomacy agendas some examples in voluntaristic mobilisations that were not moved by utilitarian aims, being mainly grounded in principled political behaviours deployed over plural levels starting from the local one. What Acuto (2013) argues on city leaders’ political willingness to expand their reach can apply to the two mayors with whom Soncini worked during the Reggio-Africa experience, Renzo Bonazzi (1925-2010) until 1976 and then Ugo Benassi (1928-2011). Yet, their work was paralleled by grassroots action from below beyond institutional setups. It is noteworthy that, in the 1960s, Italy was already the place of some early and neglected experiences in small cities diplomacy, promoted by Florence’s mayor Giorgio La Pira (1904-1977).

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

A Soncini's correspondent and supporter of Reggio-Africa solidarity, La Pira belonged to a generation of Italian left-wing Catholics who collaborated with Socialists and Communists in the name of common opposition to Fascism during the 1943-45 Resistance, which was called the 'CLN model'. That is, the convergence of the political forces that composed the 1945 CLN (National Liberation Committee) on the grounds of shared antifascist commitment. As for Reggio-Africa, the common enemy justifying some collaboration between Communists, Socialists and Catholics was eventually colonialism coupled with Fascism. In Soncini's wording: 'Portugal's double fascist and colonialist oppression' (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 2 February 1971) under the regimes of Salazar and Caetano.

The animator of international gatherings of municipalities from more than 60 countries in Florence since the 1950s (Zonova 2011), La Pira was elected President of the 'World Federation of United Cities' from 1967 to 1974. He namely promoted a voluntaristic programme of 'uniting cities for uniting nations' to build global politics from the local level (De Giuseppe 2022). Based on principled anti-war and antinuclear engagement to break Cold War logics of both the Western and the Eastern blocs, the most famous of La Pira's 'diplomatic' international actions as a mayor was his 1965 Vietnam journey to discuss a peace plan for the Vietnam war with Ho-Chi-Minh. This plan was then forwarded by the Italian government to US President Johnson (Sica 2004).

La Pira did not have any formal ambassadorial mandate, but acted out of his own political agenda to get an influence on global politics, paralleling what has been called the 'asymmetric' diplomacy of Third World anticolonial leaders such as Kwame Nkrumah and Julius Nyerere to end war in Vietnam (Bjerk 2022). La Pira's proposal was not accepted by relevant deciders, which was the pretext for La Pira's numerous detractors to give 'a caricatural vision' (Sica 2004, 454) of his international efforts, considered as unrealistic. Yet, a decade later, La Pira claimed sarcastically that the USA would have gained a much more advantageous peace plan taking the proposal that he had agreed with Ho Chi Minh, rather than what finally occurred (Zonova 2011).

Federico Ferretti, 2024 "Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia's city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa's decolonization" **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

There, what is relevant to my discourse of connecting city diplomacy from below to non-state and critical geopolitics (Ince and Barrera de la Torre 2016) is exactly the claim that cities are places provided with histories and identities allowing them playing key roles. As La Pira famously claimed: ‘Kingdoms vanish, cities remain’ (Zonova 2011, 575). La Pira also performed this agenda in funny ways like when, welcoming a Chinese delegation in Florence, he proclaimed that: ‘The Popular Republic of San Procolo [his parish] recognizes the Popular Republic of China’ (Zonova 2011, 575), still unrecognized by most states, which triggered some panic among Western diplomats not very ready to grasp irony.

There are several similarities between these municipal approaches and the aforementioned notion of ‘liminality’, which has been developed in connection with critical and subaltern geopolitics, with some specific applications to diplomatic cases. Indeed, recent scholarship in liminal geopolitics argues for more geographical engagements with diplomacy, especially starting by the multiple and sometimes unexpected places in which diplomatic work can occur, and their possible roles. According to Fiona McConnell, these works are pushing further ‘the conceptual boundaries of what we understand as constituting diplomacy’ (McConnell 2019, 52) including materiality and assemblages and considering the complex agency of circumstances that can shape decisions (Jones and Clark 2015). As McConnell summarises, the interest of liminal diplomacy is expressed in ‘the practices and geographies of liminal diplomatic actors who seek recognition through performances of formal diplomacy; and what a focus on the micro-spaces of diplomatic institutions can tell us about how modes of politics are articulated’ (McConnell 2019, 52). The very geopolitical idea of liminality implies a threshold between the ‘mimicry’ put in place by actors such as unrecognized states, indigenous communities and activists to reproduce political and diplomatic endeavours, and their effective international recognition.

It was exactly the case with anticolonialist movements, which struggled for international recognition putting in place a subaltern diplomacy (Herren 2017) directed to institutions but also to public opinion and intellectuals (Ferretti 2021a; Gomes 2010; Russo 2020). The same often

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occurs with ‘diaspora diplomacy’, which is deployed by ‘an array of diplomatic actors’ (Ho and McConnell 2019, 235) and aims at reaching multiple publics through varied strategies of communication. Ho and McConnell especially note that the ‘territorial assumptions that underpin diplomacy are troubled through diaspora diplomacy’ which is more likely to use ‘polylateralism’ than ‘bilateralism and multilateralism’ (Ho and Mc Connell 2019, 244), which characterise traditional diplomacy. It is in this entanglement of plural plans, scales and assemblages that multifarious diplomacies and geopolitics from below, including complex relations with institutions, ‘in the interests of or against the state’ (Ho and Mc Connell 2019, 250) can occur in unexpected places such as the hospital of a small Italian town as I further detail below.

While geopolitical literature is not unanimous in defining the limits of what scholars should call ‘diplomacy’, current debates are considering several ‘possibilities of expanding diplomatic spaces and interlocutors by delving less into the traditional inter-state spaces of the profession and more into everyday practices that may exhibit a diplomatic disposition or predicated on different ontologies of diplomacy’ (Constantinou et al. 2021, 582). These authors discuss the notion of ‘vernacularization’ of diplomatic practices, challenging what McConnell calls the ‘profession bias in practice theory’ (Constantinou et al. 2021, 572), which has traditionally implied that proper ‘diplomacy’ is only made by professional diplomats, excluding incursions of non-professional people in the field.

Scholars such as Jason Dittmer propose to further complicate the delimitation of the diplomatic field by considering: ‘A more-than-human practice theory, one which sets the agency of humans alongside that of materials in the flat(ter) ontology of assemblage, which makes locating practices trickier than is commonly indicated in the literature’ (Constantinou et al. 2021, 573). Scholars also discuss a further bias in diplomacy studies, that is the imperial contexts in which diplomatic practices were coded, which means acknowledging that different ways of making diplomacy can serve for ‘decolonising diplomacy’ (Opondo 2010), for instance recognizing the varied diplomatic

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

practices that have been deployed by anticolonial movements. This scholarship finds potential connections with the field of subaltern geopolitics, as the Reggio case well shows.

Subaltern geopolitics is first defined as the effort to resist hegemonic geopolitical discourses at the level of both state politics and ‘popular geographical imagination’ (Sharp 2011, 298) including practices put in place by non-hegemonic powers such as decolonised states (Cheong 2019; Kutz 2021; Sidaway 2012). These geopolitics can possibly be ‘liminal’ as their actors often stand ‘at the margins of world politics’ (Sidaway, Mamadouh and Power 2013, 169). Indeed, according to McConnell, the notion of subalternity is part of the genealogies of ‘liminal geopolitics’ exactly for its interest for ‘marginality and subalternity in critical geopolitics’ (McConnell 2017, 140). This latter shall explore: ‘How political actors outside the main power centres do not simply bear witness to dominant geopolitical discourses, but also produce their own narratives’ (McConnell 2017, 141). Like liminal geopolitics, subaltern geopolitics addresses cases that are characterised by ambiguity and in-betweenness. Both approaches foster scholarship that ‘does not want to be confined by the scale of the state which realism, even in a critical form, does suggest’ (Sharp 2011, 271)

In this vein, according to Joanne Sharp, the subaltern geopolitical subject is marginalised by big powers and mainstream politics without standing completely outside, being ‘neither the commander, nor outside of the ranks’ (Sharp 2013, 22). That is: ‘The concept of subaltern makes a direct reference to postcolonial notions of power relations, suggesting a position that is not completely other, resistant or alternative to dominant geopolitics, but an ambiguous position of marginality’ (Sharp 2011, 271). My case well exposes this kind of ambivalences on both sides of Reggio-Africa cooperation. On the one hand, PCI was an opposition party, but it was far from being extraneous to forms of sharing power at different levels in Italian politics, being especially prominent in regions such as Emilia-Romagna (De Maria 2022). On the other, both PCI and Frelimo (like most decolonization movements) could hardly claim extraneity to Cold War logics. Although provided with forms of autonomy and specificity, these groups were inserted in

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

international assemblages referring to the Eastern Bloc (Sircausano 2022; Tornimbeni 2018; Power 2019) and to dynamics that led later to the establishment of what Bussotti and De Muti (2013) call an ‘anomalous cooperation’ between Italy and Mozambique as I discuss below.

Authors such as Ruth Craggs argue for going beyond classical work based on ‘subaltern, feminist and alter-geopolitics addressing concerns about Eurocentrism [by analysing] grass-roots movements, every day experiences, and those excluded from the high politics’, such as ‘the voices and agency of post-colonial elites active in the realm of formal international relations, though from a subaltern position’ (Craggs 2018, 47). In this vein, scholarship on subaltern geopolitics addresses a variety of cases in political and cultural decolonisation from postcolonial or decolonial perspectives (Craggs and Neate 2023; Jazeel and Legg 2019; Davies 2019; Ferretti 2021b; Nicholson 2023). Furthermore, recent scholarship considers subaltern geopolitics as transnationally ‘intertwined with questions of identity and psychology that extend beyond a simple calculation of material power’ (Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira 2017, 645). For Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira, ‘decolonial Pan-Africanism’ (Browning and Ferraz de Oliveira 2017, 649) was also a form of subaltern geopolitics, which matches current scholarship on geographies of internationalism addressing dissident, decolonial and subaltern networks (Legg et al. 2022).

Thus, the historical connection between the transnational endeavours of Lusophone Africa’s anticolonial movements and the Reggio-Africa experience exposes a case of anticolonial networking whose core place was in metropolitan Europe, which allows demonstrating that liminal and subaltern approaches to geopolitics can meet in connection with ideas of city diplomacy. More broadly, these connections help us to understand openings and limitations of historical decolonisation starting from local scale practices and bottom-up strategies.

### **Reggio Emilia and transnational subaltern diplomacy**

A small town in Northern Italy, Reggio Emilia has been a stronghold of socialist movements since the First International, becoming a key place for reformist, cooperative and municipal socialism

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

inspired by Camillo Prampolini (1859-1930) since the early twentieth century (Ferraboschi 2017). Later, Reggio was an electoral fief of PCI from 1945 to this party's dissolution in 1991 (De Maria 2022), and continued with pragmatic realisations such as the famous 'Reggio Emilia approach' in children education likewise inserted in this political mood (Malaguzzi 2016). While post-war PCI could in no way be considered as a 'revolutionary party', and its leadership even fought the most radical leftist movements since the 1960s (Balestrini and Moroni 2003), some elements of radicalism resisted in the popular imagination of its 'rank and file' activists. It was the case with the heroized memories of popular struggles such as the antifascist Resistance of 1943-1945, in which Reggio partisans especially distinguished themselves. The memory of antifascism was eventually revived on 7 July 1960, when five activists were murdered in Reggio by the police of the conservative Tambroni government repressing an antifascist demonstration: thus, antifascist feelings strongly characterised Italian leftist movements in the Seventies. Another radical historical experience that remained in popular memory was the First International and its ideas of proletarian internationalism (Masini 1964).

Indeed, Soncini constantly claimed 'our wonderful internationalist tradition' (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, November 1973) as grounding Reggio-Africa cooperation, for both hinting at radical memories of local publics and performing international diplomacy, like when he saluted Guinea-Bissau's independence in a 1974 message to PAIGC President Aristides Pereira (ASG, Folder 17, Soncini to Pereira, 5 September 1974). It was indeed during an international meeting of the 'World Council of Peace' in Warsaw that everything started, when mayor Bonazzi and CONCP leaders Amilcar Cabral (1924-1973) and Marcelino dos Santos (1929-2020) first met in 1963 (Lanzafame and Podaliri 2004, 25). An important case for the subaltern transnationalism discussed above, the CONCP (*Conferência das Organizações Nacionalistas das Colónias Portuguesas*) was the organization coordinating the main anticolonialist parties of Lusophone Africa, especially Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde PAIGC (*Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde*), Angolan MPLA (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*), and of course Frelimo. The diplomatic efforts of this organism in sensitizing governments, international organisations and

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public opinions were instrumental in the decolonization of Lusophone Africa, which guerrilla alone may not have secured (Davidson 2017).

Recently, Corrado Tornimbeni has shown that CONCP's aim was not only to get international recognition for the anticolonial case, but also 'exclusive recognition' (Tornimbeni 2022, 1099) among international stakeholders for the aforementioned organisations, against rival groups that were especially combative in Angola, such as UNITA and FLNA, and for a while Coremo in Mozambique (Tornimbeni 2018). While it would be impossible to fully account here for these controversies, what Tornimbeni calls 'the diplomacy of the CONCP' (Tornimbeni 2022, 1011) was undoubtedly effective in making its member organisations the mainly recognised exponents of Lusophone Africa's decolonisation and of a new Pan-Africanist wave.

Historical scholarship on Western Communist Parties discusses how the French PCF and the Italian PCI dealt with CONCP organisations in the context of their significant investments in African decolonisation (Blum et al. 2021; Siracusano 2022). These authors note that these parties' 'foreign politics' indicated some autonomy from USSR's instructions, especially for PCI, whose idea of 'polycentrism' (Siracusano 2022, 123) represented what Anna Maria Gentili defines 'progressive emancipation from the Soviet Union's interests' (Gentili 2009, vii). Conversely, PCF remained more aligned to Muscovite orthodoxy, even suspecting the Italians of some 'revisionism'. While French communists had closer relations with anticolonial movements of former French colonies, both parties effectively collaborated with CONCP organisations, as exemplified by the privileged relations between PCI and Frelimo (Tornimbeni 2018). I would add to this the local, national and international specificity of the Reggio-Africa experience, emerging from a precious source such as the Pink Pages.

The other mobilising argument that the Pink Pages stressed in addition to internationalism—antifascism, matched the ceaseless CONCP calls to insert their struggles in the tradition of antifascist resistance, being Portugal ruled until 1974 by a fascist-inspired regime allied with

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Francoist Spain (Sidaway and Power 2005). This argument had huge success in Reggio, where local publics were already familiarized with international antifascist solidarity. Hence, the Mozambican guerrillas who were hosted at the *Arcispedale* in the early 1970 were systematically defined as ‘partisans’. On similar grounds, Bonazzi managed to make approve by the Reggio Emilia Municipal Council a greeting message to Frelimo on the occasion of the beginning of armed struggle in Mozambique in 1964 (Istoreco, Folder 88, Bonazzi to Santos, 5 November 1964), and invited Santos to Reggio in 1965 (Istoreco, Folder 3, Santos to Bonazzi, 8 March 1965; Bonazzi to Santos, 20 March 1965).

The first meeting between Soncini and Santos took place in Rome, on the occasion of the ‘International Conference in Solidarity with the People of Portuguese Colonies’ that was celebrated from 27 to 29 June 1970. Promoted by PAIGC, MPLA and Frelimo (Istoreco, Folder 3, Santos to Bonazzi, 20 May 1970) in collaboration with Italian democratic (especially left-wing) parties, this gathering famously favoured the private reception that Pope Paul VI conceded to CONCP leaders, harshly disappointing Portuguese authorities (Tornimbeni 2018). In Rome, a distribution of twinnings between CONCP organisations and ‘red’ Italian administrations was agreed within the PCI. Following this agreement between local administrators and national leaders, MPLA was paired with the city of Prato, PAIGC with San Giovanni Valdarno and Frelimo with Reggio (Lanzafame and Podaliri 2004). While Bonazzi recollected that Reggio activists would have expected to ‘pick’ PAIGC due to their contacts with Cabral (and probably for the personal prestige and notoriety of the Guinean leader), they accepted the Frelimo solution, which had finally in Reggio a unique local and international success. There, popular mobilisations and enthusiasm went well beyond formal politics, revealing the importance of places, assemblages and contingencies in diplomatic and geopolitical affairs (Dittmer 2017).

After meetings between Soncini and Mozambican leaders Santos and Oscar Monteiro, the twinning between *Arcispedale* and Cabo Delgado’s ‘Central Hospital’ was signed on 16 July 1970, officially inaugurating the Reggio ‘Committee for Healthcare Aid to Mozambique People’

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

(Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 25 July 1970). This inter-hospital twinning was indeed a Soncini's 'invention' to circumvent the impossibility, for the Municipality, of legally establishing a twinning with an organisation that was not recognised by the Italian government. Its originality and political importance did not pass unperceived in the Italian circuits supporting international municipalism, as Soncini received messages from La Pira, arguing that experiences such as Reggio should: 'Lead us to rethink our twinning policies. Twinning should not be understood as a pretext for tourism activities, but as a way to establish brotherhood and struggle against the common enemies of all communities: fascism, colonialism, pain and hunger' (SGA, Folder 3, Interview to Giuseppe Soncini by Lucia Zanetti, 1981). From the 'National League for Autonomies and Local Powers', La Pira's collaborator Corrado Corghi (also from Reggio) went even further, writing to Soncini that the *Arcispedale* had definitively shown the way to 'twinning of struggle' against 'neo-capitalistic and imperialistic violence' (SGA, Folder 12, Corghi to Soncini 30 October 1971). In the 1972 Congress of the aforementioned League, Reggio and Bologna administrators advocated 'the engagement of local administrations in anti-imperialistic struggles' (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, Sesto congresso nazionale, Lega per le Autonomie e i Poteri Locali, 16 December 1972). This can clearly provide some lessons to overtake ideas of city diplomacy merely addressing neoliberal branding rather than wider political and social problems.

The *Arcispedale* twinning had immediate international impact, calling the attention of French newspaper *Le Monde*. Few months later, Pampiglione wrote to Soncini from Tanzania, where the Frelimo headquarters were located (SGA, Folder 11, Santos to Soncini, 29 Octobre 1970), that he had met Santos and that the twinning was 'most appreciated here' as 'an act of the highest political and human value' (SGA, Folder 11, Pampiglione to Soncini, 20 August 1970) by Mozambican people. The twinning included the expedition of healthcare personnel and loads of medicines that were sent through the Cargo Overysel arriving in Dar es Salaam in early 1971 (SGA, Folder 12 Soncini to Santos, 19 January 1971) and for which Pampiglione actively sought supply from Italy (SGA, Folder 11, Pampiglione to Soncini, 5 October 1970). This was the first of a long series of aid shippings, including 'an operation room for Frelimo Hospital' (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 19 April

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1971) for which the *Arcispedale* workers decided to subscribe one day of their salary. Amazingly, while the aforementioned literature notes a ‘professional bias’ in what shall be labelled ‘diplomacy’, the *Arcispedale*’s endeavours concerned some people who were well inserted in the profession, first of all Portuguese ambassador in Rome João Hall Themido.

Ironically, this diplomat wrote to Soncini with not very ‘diplomatic’ tones to protest against the twinning and the fact that the press had mentioned some ‘liberated zones’ of Mozambique, claiming that: ‘Portugal exerts full sovereignty on the entire territory of Mozambique, where there is no liberated zone, and evidently no “Central Hospital of Cabo Delgado” exists’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP 10 March 1971, Themido to Soncini, 3 March 1971). Themido invited Reggio administrators to visit Mozambique to correct their ‘mistake’ on the spot. In this conflict, one clearly perceives the difference between a state mainstream geopolitics only considering formal state sovereignty and broader questionings of the very ideas of territory and territorial sovereignty as the best operational tools for critical geopolitics (Agnew 2021). This is something that Soncini already grasped, understanding the spaces of guerrilla as more mobile and complex than the territory’s uniform control as it can be expressed in a map.

In his response, Soncini ironically reassured Themido that ‘the Arcispedale administration has not been misled’. They signed that twinning being perfectly aware that the hospital of Cabo Delgado was: ‘An hospital of a special kind, a device at the service of the Liberation Front and of the liberated province’s population [to support] the struggle that Mozambican people carry out for their independence and for the suppression of Portuguese colonialism’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP 10 March 1971, Soncini to Themido, 23 February 1971). Also with little ‘diplomacy’, Soncini defined Themido’s letter as ‘disinformation’ and claimed the results of the 1970 Rome conference, including the Pope’s reception and the sensitization of Italian publics to a ‘struggle that we know will be long and difficult. But out of our experience, we are sure that the cause of Mozambican people will win’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP 10 March 1971, Soncini to Themido, 23 February 1971). Themido’s further letter was overtly polemic and dismissive, claiming sarcastically that he

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believed ‘that hospitals existed to accomplish different functions’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP 10 March 1971, Themido to Soncini, 3 March 1971). While the following pages of overt defence of colonialism that the Ambassador wrote down were not worthy of a further Soncini’s response, and will not deserve further discussion here, Themido had involuntarily grasped one of the points of Reggio’s subaltern diplomacy: the bid for assigning different roles to places in order to perform concrete actions in international politics in the absence of a viable institutional framework.

The same objection, claiming that an hospital was not authorised to stipulate such international agreements, was raised by a ‘monarchist member of parliament’ in Rome (Lanzafame and Podaliri 2004, 95). Some embarrassment of official institutions was reported by the Control Committee for institutional acts of the Emilia Romagna regional administration from which the *Arcispedale* depended. To check whether the *Arcispedale*’s twinning was legal, the functionaries wrote ‘a letter to the Ministry of Health to request instructions that never arrived’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP 14 April 1971). In a 1973 meeting that Soncini had in Bologna with other local administrators, attendants stated a principle that was consistent with current liminal and subaltern geopolitics. That is, following Reggio’s example, anticolonial solidarity should have been expressed through: ‘Bilateral relations of parties, organisations, representative assemblies and administrations, to provide a juridical and *de facto* recognition to liberated territories, first bases of the future independent nations’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, January 1973). While these collaborations could hardly claim a ‘legal’ status before the related anticolonial movements trespassed the ‘threshold’ of international recognition through formal political independence, what mattered there were rather the concrete collaborations that local powers could establish internationally.

It is not coincidence that, in the Pink Pages, Soncini often evoked ‘connections’ rather than ‘twinings’, a definition that, to his opinion, was too often ‘reduced to purely formal relationships or visits’ exchanges’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 31 May 1973). Among the Italian institutions that followed Reggio’s example there were the Tuscan hospital of San Giovanni Valdarno establishing a twinning with the PAIGC guerrilla hospital Mendes in Guinea-Bissau (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 31

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

August 1972), the Forlì ‘Morgagni’ Hospital collaborating with another Mozambican clinic (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 15 May 1972) and the municipality of Bologna, which signed a ‘Pact of Friendship’ with the Frelimo educational camp of Tunduru, in Tanzania (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 28 May 1972). Yet, the Reggio-Cabo Delgado experience remained the most internationally impactful also thanks to Soncini’s and Pampiglione’s idea to produce, in 1971, the brochure on basic health education *Noções para a proteção e a luta contra algumas doenças infecciosas importantes na África tropical* (Istoreco, Folder 88, *Noções*, 1971).

Authored by Pampiglione with drawings by Antonio de Renzis, this illustrated booklet was printed in around 100.000 copies (SGA, Folder 11, Pampiglione to Soncini, 29 November 1970) to be sent to Frelimo, MPLA and PAIGC (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 5 July 1971). Written and illustrated in the clearest possible way to give hints on how to fight the most common infectious diseases that affected tropical Africa through daily hygiene and prophylaxis, it had to serve both as a daily guide, also accessible to illiterates, and an instrument for teachers and healthcare personnel. Its Introduction drew a clear connection between education, healthcare solidarity and decolonisation, as a direct help to: ‘African peoples who are now struggling in Angola, Mozambique and Guinea-Bissau against the Portuguese colonisers [to] build new social and political structures’, an endeavour in which ‘struggling against diseases acquires an essential importance’ (Istoreco, Folder 88, *Noções*, 1971). This was an international geopolitics from below that everybody could try to perform, voluntarily promoted by grassroots activists speaking to other activists.

According to archival sources, this text was used in training courses that were given in guerrilla hospitals by Pampiglione and other collaborators such as nurse Maria Salghetti, who was one of the project’s protagonists as both a dedicated activist (Azzali 2023) and an healthcare professional, training Mozambican nurses in Tanzania (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP 23 November 1971; SGA, Folder 11, Pampiglione to Soncini, 29 November 1970). Pampiglione argued that: ‘No effective action in the struggle against diseases can be made without the active participation of population: to this end, it is necessary that people know, that they understand and that they feel the need to ... fight

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

from below' (Istoreco, Folder 88, *Noçoes*, 1971). Of course, the most serious 'disease' was colonialism, whose defeat, for Pampiglione, would have been accelerated by raising the levels of education and hygiene among populations.

The correspondence exchanged around this brochure reveals that Soncini's international networks were far from limited to Mozambique. They first included PAIGC and MPLA through the respective leaders Cabral and Agostinho Neto, who both wrote repeatedly to Soncini to acknowledge the brochures (SGA, Folder 12, Neto to Soncini, 28 October 1971) and to request more copies (SGA, Folder 12, Cabral to Soncini, 2 July 1971). Cabral showed special sensitivity to the solidarity efforts coming from Reggio Emilia, warmly acknowledging Pampiglione and Soncini for their 'happy endeavour whose usefulness does not need any comment' (SGA, Folder 12, Cabral to Soncini, 26 August 1971). In the summer of 1971, the Guinean leader also took the time to write again to Soncini to celebrate the first anniversary of Reggio-Cabo Delgado twinning, showing how much this act impressed the fighters in the battlefield (SGA, Folder 12, Cabral to Soncini, 29 August 1971). The booklet was also saluted by the French *Comité national de soutien de la lutte de libération dans les colonies portugaises* (CNSLCP) (SGA, Folder 12, Gastaud to Soncini, 28 July 1971) and even by the dissident Angolan organization UNITA (SGA, Folder 12, Fernandes to Soncini, 30 July 1971), then considered as close to China. Conversely, CONCP organisations were closer to Soviet Union, although they claimed their autonomy and did not lack internal dissidences (Rupp 2007). However, this booklet was far from being the sole of the print outputs produced by Soncini, who endeavoured to print Frelimo's journal *Mozambique Revolution* in Italy (including an Italian edition) (SGA, Folder 13, Soncini to Rebelo, 23 March 1972) as he will do later with the Italian version of African National Congress's journal *Sechaba* (Istoreco, Folder 54; SGA, Folder 25, Soncini to Machel, September 1981).

Another of Soncini's ideas that had a strong symbolic impact was that of inviting Frelimo's wounded fighters to be healed in Reggio Emilia. Later, also Mozambican healthcare personnel joined the *Arcispedale* for professional training, like a group of five nurses who, in addition to

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studying, participated to ‘dozens of manifestations’ during their sojourn in Reggio in 1973 (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 25 September 1974). In 1971, the first group was composed by 7 wounded guerrilla fighters, 4 of whom had lost a leg on Portuguese mines and needed prostheses. The group’s leader, Amandio Chongo, became a very popular figure in Reggio and in general in Italy, being involved in many propaganda assemblies and also serving as Frelimo official representative at the PCI national congress in 1972 (SGA, Folder 13, Santos to Soncini, 12 March 1972). In his public speeches in Reggio, Chongo explicitly matched his hosts’ claims for local antifascist memories, arguing that his people was in the same situation as ‘the Italian people and especially those of Reggio Emilia, who suffered the consequences of Fascism and revolted, embracing arms in the partisan war’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP 13 September 1971. Discorso di Chongo al Municipale). Thus, the shared use of the ‘partisans’ definition was publicly consecrated.

Beyond the military aspects of the struggle and the somehow ‘heroic’ rhetoric that generally underpins fighters’ narrations, Chongo insisted on the constructive aspects of decolonization: ‘In the liberated zones ... people elect their representatives, we campaign against illiteracy, we organize healthcare services, agricultural cooperatives and deal with social problems’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 13 December 1971. Discorso di Chongo al Municipale). Few months later, Soncini referred to Santos that, ‘from the political standpoint, the presence in Italy of seven [Frelimo] partisans is really a fact of exceptional importance’ (SGA, Folder 13, Soncini to Santos, 15 January 1972) as their presence was requested in numerous cities and was instrumental for PCI in trying to push the Italian government to take stronger stances against Portuguese colonialism.

Then, as twinnings imply reciprocity, another key step for Soncini and friends was sending a delegation to these ‘liberated zones’, which Soncini personally led between August and September 1972. Those ‘20 days spent in liberated zones’ meant that they were ‘the first Italian delegation to visit free Mozambique’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 10 October 1972). It is worth noting that, formally, this was a clandestine visit, because Frelimo only controlled some areas in Northern Mozambique (Niassa and Cabo Delgado) and visitors had to trespass clandestinely the Tanzanian border

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crossing Rovuma River ‘on a canoe’ (Ganapini 2023), which was not without dangers. Soncini did not have any state institutional title to make this journey: instead, he was supported by his administration and local networks. The impact of the event was amplified by a strategic presence in the delegation: photographer and filmmaker Franco Cigarini (1924-1982), an old friend of Soncini and his comrade in arms during the 1943-45 partisan Resistance (Lanzafame, Podaliri and Moreni 2013). As communication was paramount for anticolonial struggles, Cigarini’s photo and video documentation proved to be essential in involving local publics in the following steps of this mobilisation.

### **Seeing diplomacy from below: grassroots networks and popular activism**

In Mozambique, Cigarini realised a video documentary, ‘Ten days with Free Mozambique guerrillas’, to make known the lived experience of Frelimo fighters to Italian and international publics, showing daily life in villages and denouncing the Portuguese strikes on civilians. From a European standpoint, the film showed a quite unusual way of conducting partisan war amongst drums and dances (Cigarini 1972). Yet, the interviewed fighters had clear ideas on how to counter capitalism and imperialism. Frelimo leader Samora Machel claimed for the right to land against exploitation and misery, stressing points such as their struggle against ‘regionalism, tribalism and racism’. He importantly declared that the enemy was colonialism, ‘and not Portuguese people, who are our allies as they are equally oppressed’ (Cigarini 1972). Thus, internationalism was the first point that Machel wanted to share with his foreign guests, styling Frelimo’s struggle as ‘a worldwide fight that we cannot develop alone’, among hurrahs for ‘African unity’ and a final Soncini’s speech to an enthusiastic Mozambican crowd (Cigarini 1972).

Cigarini’s videos and pictures served for events such as the photographic exhibition ‘Angola, Guinea-Bissau, Mozambique: three liberation wars’, entirely surviving at the Istoreco archives (Istoreco, Folder 6), which accompanied the ‘National Solidarity Conference against colonialism and imperialism and for freedom and independence of Guinea Bissau, Mozambique and Angola’ that took place in Reggio on 24-25 March 1973 (*Atti*, 1973). Again, Soncini’s efforts were not

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limited to solidarity with Frelimo, because also PAIGC and MPLA sent delegates and propaganda material, which Soncini explicitly requested to Cabral and Neto (SGA, Folder 13, Soncini to Cabral, 27 September 1972; Soncini to Neto, 27 September 1972). According to Ganapini, ‘Cabral was expected to come, but he was assassinated a couple of months earlier’ (Ganapini 2023). At the end, the Conference was attended by Silvino da Luz for PAIGC, Manuel Jorge for MPLA and Machel for Frelimo, attracting hundreds of delegates from local administrations and political groups from all over Italy. Noteworthy was the presence of representatives from the African National Congress, from the clandestine opposition in Portugal, and of some African ambassadors representing governments sympathetic with CONCP, such as Tanzania, Guinea-Conakry and Congo-Brazzaville. Congo’s ambassador wrote afterwards to Soncini to express his appreciation, given that: ‘As you know, the Popular Republic of Congo currently carries out an authentically anticolonialist and anti-imperialist politics’ supporting Lusophone Africa’s struggles in the name of ‘proletarian internationalism’ (SGA, Folder 14, Biabatantou to Soncini, 9 April 1973). Indeed, the conference ended with the wish of creating: ‘A new European consciousness that repudiates imperialism, colonialism and neocolonialism’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 15 May 1973).

This conference was the occasion for a public demonstration in the streets of Reggio and saw a popular mobilisation that is only possible to understand with the help of the witnesses mentioned above: Ivano Azzali and Bruna Ganapini. My interview with Azzali took place in his office in the headquarters of the Democratic Party (former PCI) in Reggio Emilia. Azzali still continues to help the structure which, until three decades ago, was the biggest PCI local federation in Italy. More than the half of Reggio electors voted for ‘The Party’, and Azzali played organisational roles in Reggio PCI logistics as a the ‘responsible of general services’, although he tends to minimise his position saying sardonically that he was ‘just the boy of the shop’ (Azzali 2023). Passioned with international matters, Azzali shows me a copybook that he still conserves in his drawers, containing a handwritten directory with an impressive amount of contacts that he kept with dissident movements from what was then called the ‘Third World’. Especially committed to the

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

Palestinian cause, he also collaborated with Latin Americans and travelled several times to Mozambique

The interest of interviewing Azzali as a ‘privileged witness’ is that he represents a generation of activists who, despite the political defeats, did not lose their intimate faith in the cause of socialism as he claims at the beginning of the interview: ‘I am proud of having served in the Party and I still consider myself a Communist’ (Azzali 2023). Azzali does not speak as someone representing the past, as he constantly comments today politics sharing with me his own critiques to the Italian Left. It is possible to argue that Azzali’s position represents at the same time the political awareness and the popular spirit that animated Reggio people. As for Mozambique, Azzali exposes a fundamentally humane standpoint, as he was first moved by: ‘A feeling of justice for these people who cannot suffer these wrongs’ (Azzali 2023). He tells how he was impressed, in Mozambique, at seeing poor huts gun-machined by South African mercenaries to kill ANC activists hosted there and how he could not bear such scenes without being moved to action. Sadly noting how, despite all the work done, ‘Mozambique is still one of the poorest countries in the world’ (Azzali 2023), Azzali has clear ideas on the contradictions of decolonisation and on the faults of some of its supporters such as ‘the Russians and the Chinese [who] helped but also plundered them’ (Azzali 2023).

Ganapini’s interview matches several of the points raised by Azzali. Soncini’s widow and curator of their Panizzi archive, Ganapini participated to Reggio-Africa as a translator and a functionary in local cooperatives. She meets me in a café of her neighbourhood to can show me later the park dedicated to ANC leader Oliver Tambo (1917-1993), including Tambo’s statue and a monument with two blocks of Mozambican marble dedicated to Soncini. Both witnesses argue that this experience was possible in Reggio for a couple of reasons, the first voluntaristic and contingent, the second structural. The first was the presence of a couple of individuals provided with both international profiles and great determination. One of them was mayor Bonazzi, who had a strong ‘international vision’ (Ganapini 2023). For Ganapini, ‘it has been something absolutely

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

exceptional' (Ganapini 2023) that already in 1964 a mayor convinced his Municipal Council to approve a declaration in favour of an incipient movement of anticolonial struggle, that is Frelimo. The other was obviously Soncini, likewise an international figure as Ganapini evokes the 4 years he had spent studying in the Soviet Union among activists from all over the world (Ganapini 2023). Also Azzali stresses the importance of Soncini's work and personality with a joke: 'He was an enthusiastic person ... I wonder whether in the morning his collaborators placed some bricks in his suit's pockets to stop him a bit' (Azzali 2023).

The second reason was that these very determined people counted on the solidity and popular consensus of local PCI networks, 'red' cooperatives and local administrations in the entire province. This was the result of local histories of municipal socialism implying 'capacity of concrete realisations', with 'a population who mobilised whenever there was something to do. For instance, as workers of the cooperatives, we used to subscribe two hours of our salary' (Ganapini 2023) when there was a need for concrete solidarity. As Ganapini recounts, this did not only occur with Mozambique: 'For Vietnam, we donated blood to the young doctors who worked in the hospital with Soncini and who came to the factories to collect blood' (Ganapini 2023). For both witnesses, the main characteristic of Reggio people's solidarity with Mozambicans was its immediate familiarity, involving daily life and sociability. Ganapini recounts that: 'Reggio people started to physically see these guerrillas around, someone without an eye, someone without a leg ... and started to host them, invite them for lunch' (Ganapini 2023). As a bitter conclusion: 'There was much fraternity, that alas we have lost later' (Ganapini 2023). Azzali, who likewise regrets the loss of several comrades of that time, matches Ganapini's points on the importance of daily-life solidarity and popular sociability recounting that, after the first group of wounded guerrillas received their treatments: 'They were hosted in the *Arcispedale*. With some friends we went there to meet them, to know them ... then we started to take them out for dinner, and they started to do political activity around' (Azzali 2023).

Federico Ferretti, 2024 "Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia's city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa's decolonization" **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

Azzali's claim that Reggio had 'the strongest PCI Federation in Italy' (Azzali 2023) underpins both witnesses' responses to the question on whether there were any security issues in hosting people from unrecognized guerrilla movements. Azzali tells that they always informed officially the police headquarters: 'They knew that these people were guerrilla leaders ... but we never had the feeling that something wrong could happen', and it was 'the same with Palestinians, Uruguayans ...' (Azzali 2023). Basically, Reggio was neither the best place for institutional repression, which would have triggered popular reactions, nor for possible provocations, first all thanks to 'everybody's involvement'. For Ganapini: 'It was first our citizens who operated for security' (Ganapini 2023). Ganapini adds with some humour that they could also count on some agents from the municipal police, which depended from the mayor.

On a funny note, she tells the story of a guerrilla leader who suddenly arrived in the station during the night and Soncini, to be sure not to have any problems, went to take them accompanied 'by a couple of municipal police agents' (Azzali 2023). There was also a Party's 'security service' on which I felt that my witnesses still keep some discretion. Ganapini mentions several times a comrade whom I call here with an invented nickname, 'Piero'. 'With some trusted colleagues ... Piero had a culture of security and related capacities'. For Ganapini, African guests 'felt comfortable if Piero was around', and a bit less if they did not see him on the spot (Ganapini 2023). Indeed, security was a sensitive matter also given the level of political violence in Italy in the period known as the 'Years of Lead'.

Finally, in the existing literature there are different assessments on the autonomy of Reggio local PCI in relation to the national level. While Lanzafame and Podaliri stress their consistency (Lanzafame and Podaliri 2017), Tornimbeni notes some differences that were cleverly exploited by the Mozambicans (Tornimbeni 2018). Conversely, Azzali and Ganapini highlight the support that they received from Rome. It is possible to hypothesize that agency from below and popular participation in places where the Party had a popular stronghold went spontaneously beyond formal politics, determining creative assemblages without that this implied any formal

Federico Ferretti, 2024 "Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia's city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa's decolonization" **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

‘dissidence’. Both witnesses also stress that, although targeting broad alliances of local political forces such as Socialists, Christian-Democrats etc. it was the Communists who always had the initiative in Reggio-Africa. Azzali ironically argues that the contribution of the others was often only ‘that of letting us work’ (Azzali 2023).

Yet, Ganapini notes that, in the Eighties, things were changing: ‘new forces’ (Ganapini 2023) were advancing and some charismatic leaderships such as national leader Enrico Berlinguer were missing. In 1986, Reggio activists of the radical Left, eventually the Anarchist Federation, criticised Reggio-Africa, advocating in a reflection on the risks of reproducing neo-coloniality through Third World cooperation (Archive of the Reggio Emilia Anarchist Federation FAI, Press Reviews, Folder 1986, leaflet *Noi contro Voi*) as later noted by authors discussing the bottom-up start of a cooperation that would soon be institutionalised (Bussotti and De Muti 2013). This raises the aforementioned problem of shifting from constitutive to constituted power exemplified by decolonisation, as I discuss in the next section.

### **Decolonization and its matters**

Right in the middle of discussions on new projects to enhance healthcare cooperation (SGA, Folder 17, Soncini to Machel, 20 September 1974; SGA Folder 17, Soncini to Frelimo, 11 November 1974), the Carnation Revolution, saluted in unison by Frelimo and *Arcispedale* (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 18 May 1974), opened ways that would quickly produce spectacular results. Happy for Mozambican independence, Reggio activists did not forget the other ‘sister countries’, to which they dedicated information material. For instance, an issue of the Pink Pages was dedicated to ‘Independent Angola’, discussing the ‘economic geography’ and ‘synthetic history’ of a country that was considered as potentially the richest of Sub-Saharan Africa ‘alongside Nigeria’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 27 January 1975). Most importantly, the Pink Pages released Neto’s appeal to white settlers possibly sympathising with the new independent state: ‘We consider Angolan all those who are born in Angola ... We are not racist’ (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 27 January 1975). The same refrain was repeated in Mozambique, but the rumours that were spread on alleged threats for the

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

safety of white people pushed most settlers to leave, while they could have collaborated fruitfully to decolonisation given that, in Lusophone Africa, most of specialised professionals still were European people. Additionally, most infrastructures were destroyed by settlers when leaving (Gupta 2018).

In Mozambique, an official delegation of Reggio administrators, including Soncini, Bonazzi, PCI activist Olga Riccò and *Democrazia Cristiana* representative Pierluigi Castagnetti, was invited by neo-president Machel to attend the proclamation of independence as an acknowledgement of their help to the cause (Istoreco, Folder 5, PP, 15 June 1975). The delegation drafted a report that survives in Soncini's archives, stressing the need for continuing Reggio-Mozambique cooperation to 'contribute to the development of the Popular Republic' (SGA, Folder 18, Relazione, 1975). Among funny notes such as those related to their visit 'to the famous guerrilla hospital, that [Portuguese] Ambassador said did not exist' (SGA, Folder 18, Relazione, 1975), the delegation complained that, once again, Reggio was left alone in dealing with Mozambique, as the Italian government was not represented at the ceremony as it still had to recognize Frelimo. Thus, Bonazzi noted that: 'We had to represent Italy, alongside the representatives of governments from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Portugal, and part of Europe' (SGA, Folder 18, Intervista a Bonazzi, 1975). While this was clearly a way to make pressure on the Italian government for a recognition that will soon come, key is considering that institutionalising the partnership did not resolve more problems than those it created.

On the one hand, Soncini could publish a book on *Independent Mozambique* collecting Frelimo documents that he presented with optimistic tones in relation to Frelimo's possibilities for shifting from guerrilla to a 'national mass party' giving a 'political orientation' (Soncini 1976) to the Popular Republic. On the other, the official twinning that the Municipality of Reggio Emilia was finally able to stipulate with Pemba (formerly Porto Amelia), the capital of Cabo Delgado province, seemed far from the 'twinning of struggle' mentioned above. When the matter was opposing the colonialism of a fascist government, the 'CLN model' worked and several parties

Federico Ferretti, 2024 "Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia's city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa's decolonization" **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

supported, or at least did not hinder, the efforts of Reggio administrators. Some disappointment started to be expressed already in 1976 by the aforementioned Castagnetti, who accused the new Reggio PCI leaders not to be up to the former Communist generation (in which presumably Soncini remained included) issued from the Resistance (SGA, Folder 19, Rapporti col PCI a RE dopo il 20 giugno, 25 June 1976).

Beyond local matters, it is clear that, after Mozambique's independence, only Soncini and some friends could be really delighted to see Mozambique progressively aligning with the Soviet Bloc under the leadership of unique-party Frelimo trying 'to build a Marxist-Leninist party deeply grounded in the popular masses' (SGA, Folder 20, Soncini to Rebelo, 22 February 1977). This contrasted the relative eclecticism which preceded the independence, being grounded in the pragmatic specificities of African socialism, accepting concrete aid from various parts without necessarily embracing a full ideology (Opello 1975; Power 2019). Moreover, matters with poverty were aggravated by the civil war promoted by Renamo on behalf of the racist regime of Pretoria. The Istoreco folders of Dina Forti's correspondences (and partially also Soncini's) are replete with letters from Italian post-independence cooperators in Mozambique reporting an impressive list of logistic, economic and political problems which hindered their work (Istoreco, Dina Forti Archives, Folders 8 and 9). Later, international concerns for the situation of human rights in Mozambique, lasting also under the new regime, were reported by associations such as Amnesty International and carefully read in Reggio, arguably with some trouble (SGA, Folder 3, La torture en République Populaire de Mozambique, 1985).

In 1975, Soncini resigned from the *Arcispedale* to serve as a Reggio council member (*assessore*) in charge of international relations in collaboration with new mayor Ugo Benassi. In the following decade, he continued Africa solidarity work through new endeavours such as the creation, in 1978, of the 'National Committee of Solidarity with the Peoples of Austral Africa', an area that was considered in Reggio as the new key geopolitical configuration for anticolonial struggles

Federico Ferretti, 2024 "Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia's city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa's decolonization" **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

considering the destabilising role of South Africa there. The Committee had branches in Rome and Reggio, marking some continuity with ideas of local administrations' international agency.

In addition to cooperation with Mozambique, this new committee established a close relationship with the ANC through its president Tambo, who travelled several times to Reggio (Lanzafame e Podaliri 2017), and the Namibian South West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO) (SGA, Folder 22, Nujoma to Soncini, 24 January 1979). In the following years, Reggio participated to international endeavours for freeing Nelson Mandela and South African political prisoners in collaboration with other municipal councils across Europe (Lanzafame and Podaliri 2021) amidst renewed claims that 'municipalities are the bases of true democracy' (SGA, Folder 25, Soncini to Spaggiari, 6 October 1981) that Soncini repeated at the international meetings of cities. Accompanied by mobilizing episodes such as a triumphal visit to Reggio of Mozambican president Machel in 1981 (SGA, Folder 25, Soncini to Forti, 21 October 1981), the main endeavours of Reggio-Africa solidarity in the Eighties were the three 'Ships of Solidarity', cargoes bringing humanitarian aid to Mozambique (as well as to ANC and SWAPO). They were namely the Amanda in 1980, the Rea Silvia in 1984 and the 'Ship of Friendship' Reggio-Pemba associated with the *Noi con Voi* campaign, 1986, which unluckily marked a symbolic end of the Reggio-Africa experience (then resumed under other forms).

That year, a ferocious press campaign of conservative journal *Il Resto del Carlino* raised harsh polemics on cases of alleged corruption around the Pemba cargo, which led Benassi and Soncini to resign, passing the baton to a new generation of politicians who clearly had different priorities (Istoreco, Folder 33). Sadly, it was only in 1991, few months after Soncini's death, that the relevant Tribunal stated definitively that no illegal acts were committed in that affair. Among activists, the idea lasted that Soncini was wronged in the context of a reconfiguration of local and national political alliances (Istoreco, Folder 4, 'Adriano Vignali critico nei confronti del segretario di via Toschi' *Gazzetta di Reggio*, 30 August 1991). Yet, Reggio-Africa remains worthy of being

Federico Ferretti, 2024 "Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia's city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa's decolonization" **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>



rediscovered as a generous example of ‘diplomacy from below’ (Lanzafame and Podaliri 2004, 15) made out of ‘a mixture of formal and informal political channels’ (Tornimbeni 2018, 214).

## **Conclusion**

This paper has discussed a little-known and original case that can provide precious insights for broader contemporary debates. It can especially serve to give radical interpretations of city diplomacy to extend this field beyond its current (although highly valuable) applications, connecting it to broader strands in critical scholarship. While geographers are addressing a variety of cases in decolonisation, internationalism and anticolonialism, cases such Reggio-Africa suggest the importance of furthering the current geopolitical interest in practices and assemblages. Eventually, the voluntaristic actions of principled individuals and grassroots mobilisations from the local level prove to be endeavours that can gain diplomatic and geopolitical relevance in international debates.

Spanning from medieval communes to Risorgimento municipal federalism (Ferretti 2022) and later municipal socialism, and valuing ideas in decentralisation and direct democracy, Italian municipalist traditions can correct current biases on the need that urban centres become ‘megacities’ to have international voice. Although promoted by a political party, the Reggio-Africa experience was made possible by popular mobilisation and agency as this work shows. While this endeavour paralleled contemporary city internationalism by La Pira and others, it is important to consider that the impact and effectiveness of Reggio-Africa cooperation was rather in how it was communicated to wider audiences in the framework of CONCP subaltern diplomacy than in its material outcomes.

In this ‘diplomacy’, subaltern and liminal geopolitics meet and mutually cross-breed fruitfully by allowing to see at the same time the ambiguities and the openings of the discourses developed, as both approaches are interested in margins and actors outside state politics, often variously committed to gain institutional recognition. Finally, alongside other cases in geographies of

Federico Ferretti, 2024 “Conciliating subaltern and liminal geopolitics: Reggio Emilia’s city diplomacy and the geographies of Lusophone Africa’s decolonization” **Geopolitics**, early view: <https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/NQEQ5HN8YKXTGGHPDZRQ/full?target=10.1080/14650045.2023.2291067>

decolonisation discussed by the literature quoted above, the end of the Reggio-Africa experience (at least in the forms that it took with Soncini and friends) exposes the problems existing in the shift between constitutive and constituted power, that can be expressed in terms of liminal geopolitics through the metaphor of the ‘threshold’ that newly independent states crossed once officially recognized (Meneses et al. 2018). Then, after changing the institutional structure of relevant actors, nothing was longer the same.

This leaves open the question on how to complete decolonisation, which should not be limited to changes in the governments and institutional setups, but should be decolonially built from below, changing society, culture and real life.

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