

Practicing the hegemony of non-hegemony: the pluriversal politics of the Neapolitan Commons Movement

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Abstract:

The concept of pluriversal politics, which encompasses the vast array of alternatives to ecologically destructive and colonial capitalism, is crucial for envisioning emancipatory and ecological futures. However, the diversity and autonomy inherent in the initiatives composing the pluriverse pose obstacles to the unity necessary to dismantle interconnected systems of oppression, thus creating an intrinsic dilemma between diversity and unity. This paper explores the navigation of this challenge within emancipatory and pluriversal projects, drawing on empirical material from ethnographic research on the Neapolitan commons movement. The case study illuminates how social movement actors achieve simultaneous unity and diversity through the grassroots-developed concept of ‘hegemony of non-hegemony.’ In the Neapolitan context, this framework allows for diversity to thrive while maintaining essential unity, crucial for confronting economic and political powers. The findings underscore how grassroots, autonomous, and pluriversal degrowth practices can challenge capitalist growth dynamics

through unity in diversity, hence suggesting the unnecessary nature of state-led, top-down, or uniformizing approaches.

Keywords

Hegemony, Pluriverse, Social Movements, Commoning, Naples, Depatriarchalization

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Introduction

Mario, sometimes you are too sure about things. I like to be unsure about things. This is what distinguishes a collective from a commons: a collective is more about certainty, while a commons is more about doubt!

anonymous l'Asilo's activist –
dinner following a weekly assembly

The opening quote might be read as a Neapolitan commons movement's version of the well-known Zapatista call to *caminar preguntando* ('walking by asking'). It is a humble admission that no one has all the answers, even those revolutionaries who are passionately convinced of being on the right side of history. Perhaps, we could venture to say that this is a common thread in pluriversal politics, which, after all, is what allows diversity to be truly valued. Unity, in its strictest terms, requires a single truth. However, pluriversal politics allows for diversity and contradictions. Nonetheless, some form of unity is necessary for a common political project, especially for one with the ambition of overcoming the ecologically destructive, colonial, and capitalist system.

How can multiple pluriversal political projects achieve the necessary unity without disregarding diversity and autonomy? This broad question underpins our paper, and the special issue it contributes to. To address this, we position our research in Naples, where the three authors of this paper have engaged in long-term activist research. In this setting, we draw upon the insights of Gills and Hosseini (2022) to contend that commons movements offer valuable lessons in

addressing pluriversal dilemmas. By commons movements, we mean ‘politically active community projects that scale out within a territory and/or social mobilizations that materialize into practices of communal management, all aiming for a transformation toward a commons-based society’ (Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021). In Naples, while the concept and framework of the commons have been circulating within socio-environmental movements for the past few decades, a pivotal development was the wave of occupations (or ‘liberations,’ as activists called it) of the city’s public buildings that started in 2012, effectively transforming them into emerging urban commons (Micciarelli, 2014).

The central concept for this article, the one of ‘hegemony of non-hegemony’ (from now on HoNH), was devised by Neapolitan urban commons activists. Hegemony, then, deserves some clarity. It is worth referring to possibly the most influential thinker on the topic: the Italian communist intellectual Antonio Gramsci. He conceptualized cultural hegemony as a complex structure of mediation, enabling the establishment of consensual relationships between a ruling class and a subordinate class. For example, a revolutionary class has cultural hegemony if it can govern through rational persuasion rather than with violence and force (Gramsci, 1971). In the present, it is worth clarifying that the Neapolitan commons movements (and, more broadly, pluriversal politics) are best understood as (aspiring) counter-hegemonic forces in a global context where hegemony is held by the colonial, fossil, and capitalist system. In the conclusion of this paper, we will delve into what HoNH maintains of the Gramscian approach.

For now, let us turn to the kind of hegemony that, in our view, Neapolitan commons activists problematize when they apply the concept of ‘hegemony of *non*-hegemony’. Firstly, they reject the binarism and clear separation between rulers and ruled envisaged by the Gramscian theory of the state approach (Jessop, 2002). Secondly, they dismiss the interpretation of cultural hegemony prevalent in the 20th century, which is seen as a discourse-formation strategy within the mass cultural industry (Hall, 1987). Such interpretation identifies well-structured organizations (unions, associations, parties) as the main actors in politics, utilizing the unifying power of empty signifiers, a concept emphasized in contemporary leftwing (populist) politics (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). In contrast, we will argue that the Neapolitan commons movement’s HoNH brings to the fore a pluriversal politics founded on complexity, in-depth discussions, and contradictions, fostering the coexistence of a diversity of alter-capitalist perspectives without sacrificing unity.

In this paper, in section 1, we introduce pluriversal politics, its promising possibilities, and its dilemmas. The commons are presented as a promising framework and practice for overcoming the most prominent of such dilemmas: the unity vs. diversity one (Gills & Hosseini, 2022). Then, in section 2, we provide a brief overview of how commons have been understood in the literature, yet we focus specifically on how the concept has been developed in Italy, where our case study is situated. In section 3, we lay out our methodological approach. Subsequently, in section 4, we present our case study, l'Asilo, in the broader context of Neapolitan commons movements. Then, in section 5, we give an account of how HoNH is practiced by l'Asilo through the examples of consensus decision-making, the principle of non-exclusive use of the spaces, and the internal path of depatriachalization of politics. In section 6, we move our focus to the wider metropolitan commons movement, which l'Asilo is part of. We argue that the fruitful coexistence of unity and diversity is made possible, in both cases, by a concept developed by activists themselves: 'hegemony of non-hegemony' (HoNH). We shed light on how the concept has been debated and practiced, and, finally, we discuss our findings and draw conclusions.

1. Pluriversal politics and its dilemma

An increasing body of academic literature has embraced the term 'pluriverse' to encapsulate the manifold array of alternatives to capitalism that has emerged across various world regions in recent decades (Kothari et al., 2019). These alternatives stand out because of the absence of a dominant hegemonic narrative, unified strategic approach, or predetermined pathway for constructing alternative capitalist models, notably distinct from the long-standing more uniform versions of the communist and socialist paradigms, that prevailed for many decades. Instead, we observe the coexistence of multiple narratives and practices, all with the shared objective of transcending the carbon-intensive, colonial, and capitalist system (Gills & Hosseini, 2022). The ultimate aspiration for pluriversal politics is to establish a global framework in which various social and economic systems can coexist harmoniously – an ideal encapsulated in the famous Zapatista call for a 'world where many worlds fit.'

Pluriversal politics does not simply signify a group of emergent alternatives. More deeply, it challenges the conventional universal conception of modernity, which supposedly materializes through unidirectional and depoliticized linear progression in the development agenda and its associated rhetoric (Escobar, 1995; Ferguson, 1994). In essence, the pluriverse emerges as an

intricate tapestry of alternatives¹ that counters the post-colonial rebranding of colonial politics. This rebranding centers around the dogma of infinite GDP growth – a pursuit deemed imperative at any cost for the collective benefit – often referred to as the ‘growth paradigm’ (Schmelzer, 2016). However, where ‘development’ has materialized, it has exacted immense costs, affecting the self-determination and democratic processes of the communities ‘to be developed,’ and leading to environmental degradation marked by heightened resource consumption, carbon emissions, and other forms of pollution (Kothari et al., 2019). Moreover, it has contributed to perpetuating inequalities within and between countries (Hickel, 2017).

The concept of the pluriverse encompasses a wide range of social, cultural, and political transformations. It includes diverse forms of resistance and alternatives that may arise beyond the traditional class structures emphasized by Marxian theory. In this vein, pluriversal alternatives disengage from an orthodox left tethered to productivism, modernization, and progress, often associated with what could be termed as masculinist values. Instead, recent literature highlighted that the strength of pluriversal politics lies in its embrace of an approach that centers on the celebration of diversity in ways, strategies, bodies, orientations, and, crucially, in the pursuit of a system where care for people and the planet takes center stage (FitzGerald, 2022). Also highlighting diversity, Colombian anthropologist Arturo Escobar conceptualized the pluriverse as a ‘tool, first, for making alternatives to the one world plausible to one-worlders; and second, for providing resonance to those other worlds that interrupt the one-world story’ (2016, p. 22).

Nonetheless, within the strengths of the pluriverse lies a weakness: in the pluriverse, diversity poses a nuanced challenge to unity, requiring a delicate balance between embracing varied perspectives and achieving collective goals. Transformative initiatives within the pluriverse inhabit different domains, employ varying languages, and lack systematic coordination, a unified voice, and a cohesive narrative. They often remain less visible and appear more as single-issue struggles than as components of a unified movement. After all, a strong counter-hegemonic force, like actually any social movement, needs to have a collective identity built by boundary work to define what ‘we are’ as well as what ‘we are not’ (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). Gills and Hosseini describe the needed coexistence of unity and diversity as ‘the supreme dilemma of the pluriverse’ (2022). Essentially, this dilemma encapsulates one of the fundamental quandaries in political thought since its inception: the pursuit of ‘unity.’ In the case of the pluriverse, this predicament takes on a more nuanced dimension, as the goal is to

attain unity without forsaking diversity – or, in other words, to cultivate diverse and decolonized narratives that coexist democratically and in solidarity, devoid of centralization and top-down dynamics.

Gills and Hosseini argue that a ‘promising base for overcoming the dilemma of unity vs. diversity (without sacrificing one aspect for the other) comes from the idea of the Commons or Commoning’ (2022, p. 1188). They argue for a conceptual transition from perceiving commons as ‘potentially transformative alternative practices, resources, or spaces, to creating the institutional bases for integrating the alternatives into metamorphic projects’ (Gills & Hosseini, 2022, p. 1188). For this reason, Naples is an especially interesting place to investigate to shed light on pluriversality. Indeed, here is where social movements for the commons (De Angelis, 2012; Federici, 2019; Roussos & Malamidis, 2021), or commons movements (Villamayor-Tomas & García-López, 2021), have been able more than anywhere else in Europe to create an institutional framework at the local level that recognizes and provides grounds for the multiplication of commons and commoning practices from the grassroots. The following section will review the concept of the commons, with particular attention to the perspective of how Italian scholars, activists, and scholar-activists conceptualized it.

2. The Italian (and Neapolitan) way to the commons

Commons have been studied from multiple perspectives in the social sciences. In light of the pluriversal framework outlined above, we will discuss how this concept was politicized and how the category was appropriated by Italian and Neapolitan social movements and politically engaged research. First, though, Ostrom’s pivotal work deserves mention, as it was paramount for debunking the ‘tragedy of the commons’ myth, which suggests that resources are quickly depleted without public or private rules. Instead, Ostrom showed that user self-regulation can effectively and sustainably manage commons, minimizing the need for traditional public or private regulation (Ostrom, 2017). Starting from this acknowledgment of self-organization, the concept of the commons allowed a rethinking of political subjectivation by elaborating and practicing new forms of relations and institutional organization (Micciarelli, 2018). In Naples, social movements generated ‘emerging commons’ (Micciarelli, 2014, pp. 67–69), defined not only by their nature and function but also by their governing, which is shared between people and the public sector. For what concerns the counter-hegemonic efforts made by the Neapolitan commons movement, we identify at least four fundamental spheres: legal, cultural, radical

democracy and right to the city, and commoning. These four dimensions will transversally emerge in the empirical account of the HoNH (sections 5 and 6).

1. Legal: Italian commons movements have assumed a specific interpretation of the commons. They related it to fundamental rights to access and participate in managing resources and engaged in campaigns for the legal recognition of commons. The beginning of this ‘legal way’ to the commons is usually identified in the Rodotà Commission’s law proposal of 2007 and the immediately subsequent campaign for the national ‘Water Referendum’ of 2011, where the popular vote repealed the law on the privatization of water (D’Alisa, 2010; Geagea & De Tullio, Forthcoming; Lucarelli, 2011; Marotta, 2019). With similar ideas, since 2011 - after the wake of movements such as Occupy and Indignados - urban commoners in Italy have started to occupy cultural institutions, like Teatro Valle in Rome, Macao in Milan, and l’Asilo itself in Naples, making them available to everyone as cultural means of production. What is interesting from a legal point of view, is that in Naples l’Asilo and other seven occupied spaces were recognized as commons by the city administration, in a unique counter-hegemonic way, thanks to the recovery of the ‘civic and collective use’ (Casillo & Capone, 2022). A more detailed account of this can be found in section 4.

2. Cultural: scholars have started to see the institution of what we could call the Italian – and especially Neapolitan – ‘urban cultural commons’ as a reaction to cognitive capitalism² (Vattimo, 2021) by a multitude of cultural workers (Borchi, 2018; Hardt & Negri, 2011; Lazzarato, 1991; Vercellone, 2009). Sciarelli, Sciambra, Follo, and Cosentino (2021) described these commons as spaces for independent, non-commodified, and process-oriented expression rooted in self-managed spaces, and Riccio (2018) as transformative heterotopies capable of reconfiguring the ‘sensible’. Also, in an attempt to build a stronger counter-hegemonic narrative on culture, researchers, scholars, and activists from l’Asilo joined forces with allied institutions to write a collective volume discussing a cultural policy proposal inspired by commoning experiences (Cirillo & De Tullio, 2021).

3. Radical democracy and right to the city: Neapolitan commons were connected to a broader vision of urban spaces by elaborating on non-extractivist uses of immobile property and redistribution of its revenues (Del Giudice, 2022). Collective practices of reappropriation can redefine urban spaces as political spaces by building generative and concrete alternatives to neoliberal urbanism (Locorotondo, 2023). Thus, they can also question and potentially transform dominant forms of living together (Stavrides, 2023). Moreover, commons

movements can be seen as the outcome of international movements occupying squares and urban areas to claim decision-making power and protest against precarity (Kioupkiolis, 2017; Varvarousis et al., 2021). In the current crisis of political representation, commoners seek more effective forms of participation, countering the trend towards privatization of rule-making that emerges with the weakening of elected bodies. Hence, urban commons are tightly linked to participatory democracy (De Tullio, 2018). Moreover, some urban policy scholars have seen Neapolitan urban commons as enabling a form of ‘interstice politics’ able to transform institutions, implement the right to the city, and materialize an embryonic form of radical ‘face-to-face democracy’ (in Murray Bookchin’s terms) at the municipal level (Pinto et al., 2022). Indeed, Neapolitan commons significantly expanded to form commons ecologies, arguably balancing materiality and subjectivity (Ruiz Cayuela, 2021).

4. Commoning: despite recent exceptions (Sciarelli, 2024), scholars have given less attention to the daily practices of commoning processes in the Neapolitan urban commons paradigmatic case. Commoning can be understood as the activity of doing in common, ‘following self-determined value practices oriented towards the maintenance and reproduction of the socio-ecological system and its components (ecological, social, symbolic and cultural wealth; affective and social relations)’ (De Angelis, 2017; Laura Centemeri, 2018, p. 292). Hence, in this article, particular attention will be devoted to everyday commoning practices of Neapolitan urban commons to find elements that can be useful to overcome the unity vs. diversity dilemma in pluriversal politics.

3. Methodology

To address the question outlined above, we draw on the empirical data gathered through our scholarly and activist engagement with the Neapolitan commons movement. The authors of this article have undertaken militant ethnography, characterized by participant observation, interviews, and a wide range of experimental activist-scholar practices within commons movements, for several years.

The first author is a white cis male activist who lived in Naples for nearly a year (September 2021-August 2022) to ethnographically research l’Asilo’s politics of care for his PhD fieldwork. Initially focused on understanding and building trust, he soon became an active participant in all assemblies and many working groups, contributing his time and resources to

various activities in and outside l'Asilo, while forming relationships of comradeship and friendship. The second author is a cis male commoner from Naples. He was part of l'Asilo's community from 2017 to 2019 and rejoined in 2022 after a research period abroad. He conducted militant participant observation and interviews, experimenting with the form-of-life of auto-ethnography as a method to grasp the proper gaze to investigate and narrate practices of commoning. The third author is a white non-cis male activist with a background in constitutional law and cultural policies. Based in Naples, she is a member of the local Observatory of Commons and the Audit Council. Since February 2017, she has contributed to l'Asilo's daily activities, including weekly assemblies, network coordination, consultancy, negotiations, communication, fundraising, and facility management. Since 2018, she has coordinated the Feminisation of Politics (FoP) collective and participated in internal non-mixed groups within l'Asilo and the local commons network.

By 'militant' we mean an ethnography from, about, and within social movements (Buonanno, forthcoming), in which the researchers are politically and practically positioned (Juris, 2007). Our research aims to contribute to both academic and activist concerns, seeking to produce knowledge that can be useful in advancing social movements (Halvorsen, 2015). Our aim is not only to bring analytically to the fore a concept (with its related practices) developed within social movements, but it is also to 'try to figure out what might be the larger implications of what they are (already) doing, and then offer those ideas back, not as prescriptions, but as contributions, possibilities—as gifts' (Graeber, 2004, p. 12). In this vein, we plan moments of restitution with l'Asilo and the Neapolitan commons movement. We hold, with Juris, that activists can be empowered through 'a politically engaged and collaborative form of participant observation carried out from within rather than outside grassroots movements' (2007, 164). In addition, researching the unity vs. diversity dilemma seems particularly prone to activists' methods in that, following Hale (2006, p. 108), 'activist research methods [...] are especially appropriate to employ when an organized group in struggle is intensely concerned with the analytical question at hand and when the very conditions of their struggle involve a challenge to the existing analytic paradigms'. The grassroots concept of HoNH seems to be a case in point. Finally, we would like to add that ethics approval was not required at our institutions, however, best practice guidelines were followed concerning data collection and management.

In this article, we take the Neapolitan context as a salient entry point for potentially looking at multiple scales of pluriversal politics. For several reasons, the Neapolitan commons movement

is particularly suited to be our case study. First, Naples (the third most populous Italian city) constitutes a paradigmatic case of the emergence of commons movements. Second, situated in the Italian South, the city is socio-economically on the fringes of the European continent—a South within the Global North or a peripheral city within the realm of capitalist development. The city has been dealing with widespread poverty, unemployment, and criminality and has often been depicted at the national and international levels as an inherently problematic city (Dines, 2013; Moe, 2002). Italy, unified only about 160 years ago, famously maintains staggering inequalities between North and South that have been long framed in the public discourse as ‘the Southern question’. In this context, the residents of the Neapolitan region have frequently been subjected to discriminatory discourses from Italian northerners, and, akin to the broader Italian southern context, its portrayal has been shaped by colonial discourses³ (Conelli, 2022). Yet, perhaps not casually from a pluriversal perspective, it is in a marginal city like Naples where we find one of the most extensive and radical experimentations with commons and commoning in a European metropolis.

4. Hacking the law between unity and diversity

Our case study is the Neapolitan commons movement, yet we situate our research from the perspective of a specific urban commons in which the three authors, to different degrees and at different moments, have been active participants: l’Asilo. This was also the first occupation in Naples to be framed as ‘commons.’ In 2012, while austerity measures were being approved and felt in the country in the aftermath of the Great Recession, a group of artists and cultural workers carried on the symbolic occupation of a big city-owned building (an orphanage from the XVI century) to protest against their precarious working conditions and lack of spatial resources for culture and art. After three days, activists, joined by many more in the meantime, decided to make the occupation permanent, transforming l’Asilo into a commoning process that opened the space for collective use and management. Since then, governance has revolved around weekly decision-making assemblies open to everyone, using consensus decision-making and prohibiting any exclusive use of the space, as access is granted based on sharing or rotation criteria.

In addition, following the occupation, l’Asilo secured legal recognition of their self-government through an innovative legal tool created by activists themselves: the ‘urban civic and collective use.’ ‘Civic uses’ in the Italian law system are a long-standing institution born to ensure the

collective governance of a resource by its community of reference, according to rules defined by customary practices of use (De Lucia, 1999; Grossi, 2018; Principato, 2015). This tool was the seed for the legal recognition of community use and space management (Capone, 2016). However, activists also innovated the traditional juridical instrument, as the conception of ‘community’ they developed was not in the traditional ‘communitarian’ meaning but in an inclusive, heterogeneous, and ever-changing sense.

In practice, l’Asilo’s activists wrote collectively, in public and open assemblies, a *Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use (hereinafter Declaration)* (2015), formally recognized later by two Resolutions of the Giunta Comunale (City Government) (*Delibere* 400/2012, 893/2015). This Declaration ‘rules the use of the spaces of l’Asilo and the means of production it contains, ensuring usability, inclusiveness, fairness, accessibility, and self-government.’ The Administration, on its part, by approving the Declaration, recognized not only a mere access entitlement but also ‘the rights to the direct administration of the building itself.’

Hence, the public domain is neither used exclusively nor entrusted to a particular private subject, but open to the entire community. This process allowed the building to become an ‘interdependent’ center of artistic production, where anyone wishing to employ the space to work, rehearse, or organize civil, political, and cultural initiatives only needs to propose the activity to the Management Assemblies. These do not exercise an artistic direction as long as initiatives respect the basic principles of antifascism, antisexism, and antiracism. These principles are very important because they constitute the lowest common denominator of any political activity in l’Asilo. Said otherwise, they represent the *hegemonic* contours within which *non-hegemony* can be possible. They are a condition of the existence of non-hegemony and, more broadly, a fundamental element of HoNH.

With this participatory establishment, the administration does not abandon its responsibilities. Indeed, by recognizing the Declaration, the city government binds itself to very precise commitments: providing ‘the management expenditures and what is necessary to ensure adequate accessibility to the property’ (Declaration, Art. 20). Not least, the ‘City Administration undertakes to intervene in any case ensuring access to and use of the spaces according to the scheduled activities’ (Declaration, Art. 20). These public expenses are justified through the recognition of the ‘civic profitability’ of the experience, i.e., the ability of the commons to generate a social non-monetary (civic, cultural, and social) value which is worth

the expense of maintaining the building (Pascapè, 2017). In this way, a piece of real estate became, through collective will, an ‘emerging commons,’ representing not only a platform of mutualism for workers in the arts, culture, and performance but also an incubator for democratic participation.

Afterward, the same path was followed in favor of seven more spaces, declared commons in new resolutions (*Delibere* 446/2016, 458/2017, 424/2021).⁴ This was made possible by both the ability of communities to propose credible legal and institutional tools and the openness of the previous government (Mayor de Magistris) to proposals coming from democratic participation. Now, the city’s recognition of occupied urban commons can raise the suspicion that counter-hegemonic initiatives (such as the Neapolitan commons movement) are being subsumed by hegemonic forces; i.e. the capitalist state apparatus through the city administration. Indeed, more generally, the literature recognizes a certain ‘ambivalence’ of processes of urban commoning, often incorporated within the hegemonic discourse on capitalist innovation (Enright & Rossi, 2018). However, two things must be noted. First, the Neapolitan way to the commons is widely regarded as remarkably ‘subversive’ (among the legal ones in the European context) because of the virtually total autonomy enjoyed by the urban commons. Second, the literature on new municipalism has problematized the idea that local city administrations are equivalent to state apparatuses, emphasizing the municipal scale as a strategic entry-point for counter-hegemonic struggle and visualizing opportunities for the ‘commonification of the public’ (Bianchi, 2022; Roth et al., 2023). Still, it is important to notice that some of the city’s occupied spaces, which can also be analyzed as commons, decided not to seek recognition by the administration nor to form part of the commons network, hence posing a challenge to unity in this sense.

For what concerns the dilemma at hand in this paper: Neapolitan urban commons emerged from a bottom-up network, where each commons has its vocation and way of governance. Diversity is hence at play. However, in the search for unity, the network has promoted a path of internal dialogue to identify principles common to all Declarations, such as non-exclusive use of the space, non-commodification and rejection of competitive economies, management by assembly, absence of artistic direction, assumption of responsibility by the administration concerning the accessibility of spaces, exclusion of the possibility of conditioning access to spaces on a binding economic contribution, the constant self-regulating capacity of communities, and thus the modifiability of the Declarations only by the assemblies themselves.

All of this testifies to a baseline unity of the network despite respect and appreciation of the fundamental autonomy of each urban commons. We will now turn to the empirical account of more specific elements of HoNH, first in l'Asilo itself, then in the broader commons Municipal Network.

5. The hegemony of non-hegemony in l'Asilo's practice

We heard evoking HoNH multiple times in l'Asilo's assemblies. We could not say who coined it and, if we asked other activists, we would be answered that it is a product of the 'collective intelligence' of commoners. To be precise, we are not claiming that every activist in l'Asilo is aware of, or supports, the concept. We claim that it is an original concept we often heard from multiple activists in the context of the Neapolitan commons movement, particularly of l'Asilo. After all, experimenting with alternative epistemologies is not uncommon in social movements and should be understood as a fundamental contentious practice (della Porta & Pavan, 2017). Moreover, HoNH can be understood as a case of social movements prefiguring political theory (Wathne, 2023).

In the following lines, we explore three important elements—'consensus,' 'non-exclusive use,' and 'depatriarchalization'—that illustrate particularly well what HoNH means empirically for l'Asilo's politics. From its inception, l'Asilo has been committed to averting hegemonic tendencies. A pivotal illustration of this ethos can be traced back to the decision made when the artist collective initially occupying the building opted for dissolution. This deliberate act aimed to ensure that commons would be genuinely open, horizontally structured, democratic, and conducive to commoning practices. After intense discussions, the occupying collective decided to renounce its hegemonic role and let all decision-making power to a weekly assembly open to everyone. Decisions would be made by consensus, a radically democratic practice primarily inherited from the Global Justice Movement (Della Porta et al., 2006). It is in those days, we presume, that activists started to mention HoNH.

While this is not the place to debate the ample literature of democratic theory on consensus decision-making, it is essential to notice how its understanding in l'Asilo is specifically related to HoNH. One of the well-known criticisms of consensus is that it is imagined as the need to have everyone *agreeing* on a course of action. Instead, in l'Asilo and elsewhere, people often disagree on things but avoid vetoing them if proposals have been widely discussed and

improved enough. They do this because of an experimental and prefigurative understanding of politics (the centrality of *doubt*, as expressed in the opening quote), that values trial-and-error and tries to care for dissent. This consensual infrastructure conserves the problematics, without aiming to solve them unilaterally: It is, indeed, an attempt to achieve unity (consensus) while conserving diversity (dissent). In relation to the theoretical framework outlined above, HoNH, as seen through consensus, contributes to the counter-hegemonic dimension of radical democracy.

Another tangible manifestation of the HoNH in l'Asilo occurs through the principle of 'non-exclusive use' embraced by commons' activists, which significantly influences the spatial configuration of l'Asilo, where no specific collective or group can be exclusively entitled to use a space. Spaces are allocated for specific timeslots, with sharing criteria (e.g., typically in workshops or coworking rooms), or rotation (e.g., for theatre rehearsals). This practical mechanism is vital for commoning, as it prevents spatial resources from being exhausted by individual people or groups, thus concretely allowing openness to newcomers. Such a radical openness, in turn, ensures the political and legal legitimization of l'Asilo, as it cannot be identified as 'someone's' space but one that everyone has the right to use.

Since its occupation in 2012, the internal arrangement of l'Asilo's spaces has been meticulously designed to provide maximum flexibility and adaptability in response to evolving needs. To understand this, it is worth noting that a substantial portion of l'Asilo's activists comprises politicized artists who prioritize processes over outcomes, actively endorsing and cultivating unpredictability and uncontrollability. The cinema space, once a chapel, is now equipped with a projector and a large screen. Here, activists have affixed wheels to the rows of chairs donated for the new cinema, enabling them to be reconfigured in various layouts, such as a circular arrangement when the space is required for an assembly. A similar approach is observed in the theatre, where the seating infrastructure, constructed within l'Asilo's workshop, is entirely movable and modular.

This approach is rooted in the idea that physical spaces are designed to be interdependent and available for all l'Asilo's projects. Moreover, the physical infrastructure is intended to fully adapt to evolving needs. Every material object, such as a painting or sculpture, displayed in l'Asilo, is hung with the understanding that it is not intended to be permanent and may be relocated when the space's requirements change or new artworks need to be hosted. While the

principle of non-exclusive use should not be taken too rigidly and may have exceptions (for instance, the theater's lighting system cannot be easily moved to the library, nor can thousands of books be quickly relocated to the theater), it primarily serves the purpose of facilitating spontaneity and experimentation, as in the urban studies shift from the 'zoning approach' to the one of 'designing disorder' (Sendra & Sennett, 2022). In sum, HoNH also holds a spatial aspect: the hegemonic agreement on the spatial configuration of l'Asilo (unity) attempts to avoid hegemonic uses of the space, whether in terms of who uses it, for what purposes, or with which artifacts (diversity). With regards to the theoretical framework outlined above, HoNH, as seen through non-exclusive use, relates to both the cultural and commoning dimensions of Neapolitan commons.

Finally, another outstanding - and maybe more critical - example of the entanglement between unity and diversity is the 'depatriarchalization of politics' process that l'Asilo embarked on from 2018 to 2023. This process was initiated thanks to an alliance with the transnational non-mixed⁵ collective Feministization of Politics,⁶ an initiative put forward by activists of radical municipalism (Roth et al., 2023). Its purpose is to promote practical tools to make the internal governance of political organizations consistent with their stated goals of radical democracy based on the voice of marginalized subjectivities. This section addresses how this topic has been explicitly and contentiously thematized in l'Asilo's assemblies as an internal hegemonic struggle.

Gradually, because l'Asilo lacked specific instruments and protocols for depatriarchalizing politics, the latter became a frequent theme in the community's debates. A non-mixed group was formed, open to all the non-cisgender-male commoners and in alliance with non-cisgender-male persons of the metropolitan commons network. Excluding cisgender men from specific spaces and moments is a traditional feminist tool to create safer spaces for non-cisgender male persons and allow a better expression and advancement of emancipatory practices. In our case, when highly sensitive matters came at stake (e.g., dealing with sexual abuses that occurred among l'Asilo's activists), the non-mixed group started considering itself as the legitimate decision-making space to have the last say on such questions. Indeed, feminist activists considered that the general (mixed) assembly - due to its patriarchal structures of power - was not a place where all the voices could be heard and listened to.

At the peak of this tension, the non-mixed group defined its meetings as the ‘non-mixed assembly of l’Asilo’. When this emerged in l’Asilo’s general assembly, a cisgender male member of the community labeled it as a ‘hegemonic’ attempt by a feminist affinity group to gain power over other groups (thus referring to the above understandings of hegemony that l’Asilo has rejected). Of course, the ‘non-mixed assembly’ idea was radically provocative. However, feminist l’Asilo’s activists defended it, building on a different idea about hegemony. First, they refused to be considered an affinity group – especially one aiming to dominate other groups. Except for its non-mixed character, it was utterly analogous to how the general assembly claimed to be: open to everyone and horizontal. Second, they did defend the need for a feminist hegemony – i.e. a broad consensus around feminist ideas and practices – in the general mixed assembly as a precondition to make it genuinely open and horizontal.

This case allows us to see what happens when conflicts over the understanding of HoNH take place. Is the non-mixed assembly a group betraying non-hegemony, or is antisexism – that, along with antifascism and racism, is a fundamental principle of l’Asilo – something that *has* to be hegemonic? The authors agree with this second option. Yet, this case is useful to see that HoNH does not resolve, once and for all, the tension between hegemony and non-hegemony, and between unity and diversity. In sum, it is evident that this movement highlights an urgent and sometimes painful need to construct a feminist concept of hegemony as a liberating and emancipative power rather than a power of domination (Roth et al., 2020). As a final consideration concerning the theoretical framework outlined above, HoNH, as seen through the ‘depatriarchalization of politics’ process, has a transversal effect on all the dimensions presented.

6. The hegemony of non-hegemony in the commons network

Having looked at the single commons’ scale, we now turn to the larger city scale. In Naples, several urban commons are part of a network addressing various topics of urban policies, starting from everyday commoning practices. Each urban commons physically hosts different projects with diverse agendas, linked, for example, to ecology, labor rights, income, antiracism and immigration, independent arts, media activism, right to the city, and so forth. Moreover, urban commons also have different specific geminal issues that have triggered and nourished the occupation: for example, cultural issues in l’Asilo, environmental/urban regeneration struggles in Bagnoli’s commons, the antifascist struggle in Giardino Liberato, and others.

The network of commons is based on a complex balance between nourishing ‘shared practices’ in the neighborhoods and the wider city and interacting with public and private institutions. ‘Shared practices’ can be exemplified by events such as the antifascist Festa del Friariello or the Social Carnival: they are both initiated by one of the nodes of the network - respectively Giardino Liberato and Gridas - but are actively supported by the other nodes, that contribute by volunteering in organizational tasks, adjusting their program to avoid overlapping events, relaunching public communications, creating their carnival masks and parades, and so on.

A tight intertwining of strategic thoughts and emotional factors often mediates the balance between ‘shared practices’ and institutional relationships. Of course, there is a shared understanding that both actions are crucial as political transformation needs to occur at multiple scales. However, different commons - and often different people within the same commons - have diverse views of the relative importance of political actions and the risks they entail. To be more explicit, probably with an oversimplification of the different thoughts, a possible worst-case scenario – with too little attention to practices – is one where commons are entirely absorbed in and politically neutralized by the state or market and lose their ability to encounter people’s needs and experiment with new forms of living together in a non-competitive and non-extractive way; the opposite worst-case scenario is one where commons become a thriving community experiment, but unable to be translated in a long-lasting change, such as affecting institutional behaviors and changing repressive laws.

The commons network has aimed to take care of the coexistence of these approaches consciously. This attitude is mirrored in each Declaration and the differences between the Declarations themselves. The Declaration is one of the most outstanding expressions of autonomy of each commons, approved by its own assembly which has the last say on the final text. Nevertheless, over time, there has been an effort and a political will of Neapolitan urban commons also to declare the existence of a shared path and array of principles of the entire commons network. The first step in this direction is the drafting of shared principles in a collective writing process lasting several months. The form itself of the charter is a compromise, as it is hybrid: shaped similarly to a legal text but more discursive and open than the Declarations themselves. Concerning the contents, it translates the essential points on which all the commons agree: the basic principles of antifascism, antiracism, and antisexism; assembly

methods respecting minorities; gift economies; self-determination of the community concerning authoritative power; non-exclusive use.

Even more interesting is how these principles have been articulated across different Declarations. These are effectively comparable as they follow the same structure and similar wording concerning the commonly agreed principles. Nevertheless, they differ on crucial points. For example, to be an ‘inhabitant’ (member) of the community, you need to participate in care practices for the space in Scugnizzo Liberato while participating in assemblies in l’Asilo. And only in some commons, such as ex-OPG and Villa Medusa, do executive committees exist. Due to the specificity of the community of Santa Fede, its Declaration provides a ‘street unit’ for homeless people. These choices underline the existence of significant political differences between commons: in some, Leninism is predominant; in others, anarchism; and others have closer relations with electoral politics. However, almost uniquely, at least in the Italian cities’ panorama, these commons do not fight hegemony struggles against each other, as they know that this would undermine the possibility of walking a shared path and mutually enriching through other commons’ knowledge, experiences, and reflections. This common understanding is HoNH.

An important test bed for this cooperation was the end of left-wing outsider Mayor de Magistris’ mandate (2011-2021) and the political majority that had recognized the commons. The new government, adopting a more neoliberal stance, decided to maintain the official status of urban civic and collective use but substantially questioned its political nature. This scrutiny mainly targeted the economic self-sustainability of the commons and their non-neutral political stance, which, according to the new government, might lead to exclusionary practices (Lieto, 2022). Moreover, the new government promoted the proliferation of technical consultative bodies, as the existing Observatory was complemented by a new consultative body directly appointed by the city government itself at their complete discretion. Meanwhile, in the context of post-COVID policies, national recovery funds revamped the authoritarian conditionalities of EU financial governance even at the local level. Similarly, the ‘pact for Naples’—according to law 234/2021—grants new state funds to the city, but only on the condition that measures are taken to rationalize public sector and administrative spending. (De Tullio, 2022). All these changes made commoners nervous about the future of their political experiment.

Nevertheless, Neapolitan emerging urban commons are well and alive. While the majority party (Partito Democratico) has most often promoted the evictions of occupied social centers in most

other Italian cities, in Naples, urban commons were such fundamental welfare, cultural, and political urban infrastructure (Pinto et al., 2022), that the new administration, as a first move, convoked them for an official meeting. A formal letter sent to the email addresses convoked commons' representatives in a matter of a week. In less than 24 hours, eight commons communities involving hundreds of people answered firmly: first, that a week was not enough for eight radically democratic commons to prepare this meeting collectively and that more time was needed; second, that commons are open communities and have no representatives, so a big meeting room would be needed because any member could potentially show up. The city government agreed. This episode illustrates the unitary strength of the commons network.

The same was demonstrated when the network met in a big assembly to prepare the meeting with the administration, and a complete agreement on the few principles on which no compromise would have been possible was showcased. For the rest, during the meeting with the administration, the network raised its points and countered the neoliberal approaches of the government and its public declarations with an impressive plurality of voices and points of view. Different generations, individuals from diverse social, economic, and professional backgrounds, and residents from various corners of the city were brought together by converging nuances of social conflict. These included the dynamics of touristification and expulsion in the city center, a repressive attitude towards homeless people, and environmental struggles in Bagnoli, among others. In sum, this section has shown how HoNH materializes, in practice, at the city scale. In this sense, this section contributes significantly to the literature on the commons that specifically addresses the issues of radical democracy and the right to the city.

Conclusion

Our study contributes to the debates on pluriversal politics by ethnographically examining how the Neapolitan commons movement balances unity and diversity. Through the concept of the hegemony of non-hegemony (HoNH), developed by Neapolitan commoners, we offer insights into practical strategies for addressing the supreme dilemma of the pluriverse. In particular, we show how HoNH materialized legally for both l'Asilo and the movement (Section 4) and explore specific elements of HoNH in l'Asilo's practice: consensus (radical democracy), non-exclusive use (cultural and commoning dimensions), and depatriarchalization (transversal relevance) (Section 5). Finally, we detailed HoNH's broader application in the Neapolitan

Commons Movement, particularly concerning radical democracy and the right to the city (Section 6).

HoNH emerges as both a political practice and a conceptual tool, designed by activists to make their practice visible to themselves. It highlights the relational dynamics in the self-management and governance of Neapolitan commons, characterized by horizontality and the maintenance of political diversity within communities and across the Municipal Commons Network. The term ‘hegemony of non-hegemony’ captures the inherent tension between unity (‘hegemony’) and diversity (‘non-hegemony’). This oxymoron reflects the movement's ironic acknowledgment that even in the quest to avoid hegemony, a form of hegemony is inevitable, albeit one that celebrates diversity.

The theory and practice of HoNH, we believe, is ultimately not that far from Gramsci's idea of cultural hegemony. Gramsci, in 20th-century fascist Italy, viewed hegemony as a cultural medium between intellectuals and the people. The hegemonic mediation he designed takes the shape of representation, with the latter being a semantic unit acting as a consensual infrastructure, bridging the binary and dualist relationship between rulers and ruled. As is well known, he advocated for the subalterns to become rulers through cultural hegemony. However, the HoNH experienced within the Neapolitan commons does not build consensus through the identification of the governed in a representative mediation imagined by a class of rulers, according to an imitative connection. Instead, the Neapolitan commons movement practices HoNH as a language infrastructure that transcends binary ruler-ruled relationships, fostering a consensual infrastructure that embraces diversity. This approach facilitates a pluriversal politics where multiplicity drives the potential for commoning and daily creation, avoiding mere imitation of rulers.

The municipal level serves as an essential entry point for discussions spanning various scales; hence, our findings also have broader implications. Often, it is assumed that grassroots, small-scale, prefigurative initiatives aiming to overcome capitalism, while inspiring, inherently lack the coordination and unity necessary to pose a real counter-hegemonic threat to current hegemonic powers. Consequently, it is suggested that the only vehicle for coordinated struggle can be top-down politics and policies through the state, party politics, and international institutions. However, this kind of politics is virtually never truly emancipatory, most often resulting in either counterproductive reformism or oppressive state bureaucracies. It is in opposition to these dynamics that the political proposal of the pluriverse has emerged. In this

respect, this article aims to show that pluriversal politics is not antithetical to coordination and unity, but rather that grassroots, autonomous, and pluriversal degrowth practices can challenge capitalist growth dynamics through unity in diversity, hence suggesting the unnecessary nature of state-led, top-down, or uniformizing approaches.

To conclude, however, we acknowledge that the ‘supreme dilemma of the pluriverse’ described by Gills and Hosseini (2022) is only partially solved. This dilemma pertains to the challenge of achieving unity among diverse political alter-capitalist initiatives emerging in diverse socio-cultural and geographical contexts worldwide while maintaining their autonomy and diversity. While our case study does not offer a definitive solution to this dilemma, it does offer a theoretical and empirical framework that demonstrates how commons movements in Naples successfully navigate the delicate balance between diversity and unity. In light of these findings, we suggest future investigations to delve deeper into the strategies and mechanisms employed by pluralistic movements in different geographical and cultural locations to maintain unity amidst diversity. Additionally, examining the transferability of the Neapolitan experience to other contexts and identifying its limitations can offer valuable insights for advancing our understanding of pluriversal politics and its challenges.

¹ ‘Global tapestry of alternatives’ is also the name of a global network of movements and initiatives inscribed in pluriversal politics: <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/>

² A concept denoting a new form of capitalism that is characterized by the increasing importance of knowledge and information in the production of wealth.

³ Conelli explains how the Italian south has been shaped by colonial discourses despite not being subject to colonization.

⁴ An archive of the relevant legal acts is: <https://commonsnapoli.org/archivio/documenti-giuridici/>. See also Capone 2022.

⁵ In this case, ‘Non-mixed’ refers to the exclusion of cisgender men. Generally speaking, non mixed groups aim to gather together (only) people experiencing the same axis of oppression to allow their autonomous empowerment and self-organisation.

⁶ ‘Feministisation of politics’ entails the idea of making politics more feminist, i.e. antidiscriminatory in an intersectional way, but also more horizontal, caring, attentive to different languages, etc. ‘Depatriarchalization of politics’ is the expression which adopted – especially in the Italian context – to make the same concept gender-neutral, as no gender can be *per se* associated to being more feminist than others; rather, what is important is the adherence to anti-patriarchal values. See: <https://municipalisteurope.org/feministisation-of-politics/post/fop-self-assessment-a-guide-to-start-a-feministisation-process-in-your-organisation/>.

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