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***Quandaries of Radical Care Politics:  
The contested politics of care in urban  
commons movements***

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## **Abstract**

In recent years, the concept of “care” has been pushed by overlapping global crises to the center of political debate. No longer confined to feminist thought and movements, it now anchors many social movements’ agendas, especially in urban commons, where activists engage in collective reproduction and sharing of the social-ecological wealth and web of life beyond state and market logics. Yet we still know little about what “care” means to urban commons movements, and about the negotiations through which it is articulated or tacitly practiced in everyday politics. Guided by the question of how urban commons movements articulate and practice care, I conducted a long-term, theory-building ethnography (2021-2023) of l’Asilo, a self-managed cultural center in Naples, and Àgora, a community urban garden in Barcelona, combining participant observation and semi-structured interviews with participatory and activist methods. After proposing a theoretical framework for radical care politics based on both value and values, this thesis situates each case historically and then traces the language, practices, and conflicts of care across the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. It finds, first, that at l’Asilo “care” has diffused as a contested political keyword, widely regarded as missing in practice and therefore placed at the center of debate, prompting continual reflection on gender, ethics, and praxis. Second, the pandemic revealed the fragility of spontaneous mutual aid, leading activists to devise deliberative care infrastructuring: an experimental, partial and processual organization of care while avoiding bureaucratization. Third, comparison with Àgora shows that class influences the practice of discursive, or embodied, care: middle-class “immaterial” workers center deliberation, whereas the caring classes (such as women, migrants, and interpersonal-service workers, intersectionally understood) sustain tacit material care, each pattern carrying distinct implications for commons democracy. Finally, disputes over boundaries, inclusivity, and safety, show that boundary work is care, and that it can both widen and narrow participation, complicating intersectional hierarchies of gender, race, and class. The thesis synthesizes the findings with a four-part typology of care infrastructures in urban commons movements: discursive, embodied, organized, and boundary. It contributes to social movement studies, critical commons literature, and sociology more broadly. Through extended ethnography, it offers scholars empirically grounded insights into radical care politics and provides activists with tools to identify both the complexities and the promises of care for collective action and commons reproduction.

**Keywords:** Ethnography; Collective Action; Commoning; Social Movements; Prefigurative Politics

## Ringraziamenti

*Las ruinas no nos dan miedo. Sabemos que no vamos a heredar nada más que ruinas, porque la burguesía tratará de arruinar el mundo en la última fase de su historia. Pero—le repito— a nosotros no nos dan miedo las ruinas, porque llevamos un mundo nuevo en nuestros corazones. Ese mundo está creciendo en este instante.*<sup>1</sup>

Buenaventura Durruti, 1936

Il sindacalista anarchico spagnolo Buenaventura Durruti pronunciò queste parole quasi un secolo fa, eppure mai sono sembrate così attuali. La crisi ecologica e climatica, la pandemia, le guerre, il riarmo, il genocidio israeliano a Gaza, il potere sempre più concentrato nelle mani di sempre meno persone, l'estrema destra più forte ovunque: la mancanza di cura è al potere. Eppure, ovunque, ci sono persone che continuano, ostinatamente, a prendersi cura delle relazioni, delle comunità di cui fanno parte, del mondo. E in questi anni ne ho incontrate tante, nei più svariati cammini della vita, in università, nelle lotte. A voi è dedicata questa tesi, ed è voi che ringrazio innanzitutto; senza di voi, questa tesi non l'avrei scritta.

Se scrivo questa tesi è anche perché penso che forse la cura è davvero il concetto più importante della vita e della politica, non solo e non tanto per il suo lato omaggiato e positivo quanto piuttosto per la sua complessità: la relazione della cura con il controllo, con la libertà, con la comunità, con il gioco, con la lotta, con l'autonomia, con la famiglia, è tutt'altro che scontata. Visceralmente, credo di essermi interessato inconsciamente a tutto questo, in primo luogo per via della cosiddetta storia familiare, luogo in cui, contraddittoria e intricante, la cura non è mai mancata. Ringrazio dunque la mia famiglia, o almeno quella che mi segue dalla nascita. Grazie infinite a mia madre e a mio padre, che con il loro appoggio e amore incondizionato mi hanno permesso di fare un passo dopo l'altro, e arrivare fin qui. E un immenso grazie alla tata, la persona che più di ogni altra mi ha insegnato cosa significhi prendersi cura degli altri. Grazie alla nonna MT, che forse, a modo suo, mi ha insegnato il contrario. E grazie alla nonna ML, che mi ha sempre voluto bene da lontano.

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<sup>1</sup> “We are not in the least afraid of ruins. We are going to inherit the earth. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The bourgeoisie might blast and ruin its own world before it leaves the stage of history. We carry a new world here, in our hearts. That world is growing in this minute.” (Paz & Morse, 2006, p. 478) The most famous sentence of anarcho-sindicalist Buenaventura Durruti, supposedly said in an interview given in the Aragon Front during the Spanish Civil War which might have never taken place (D. Evans, 2023)

caffè, letture, e chiacchiere. Con Maria Francesca, Cecè, Marie sento di aver costruito amicizie politiche nel miglior senso della parola. Ma quasi tutto questo non sarebbe avvenuto senza l'Asilo, al centro del mio (e non solo mio) vortice napoletano, comunità porosa grazie alla quale, a Napoli, non sono stato figlio unico. L'Asilo è stata la comunità politica duratura più complessa, grande, folle, porosa, contraddittoria, imprevedibile, e magica che ho conosciuto. A questa comunità va il mio più profondo ringraziamento. E, in particolare, a persone che sono state importanti per me in vari momenti: Franceschina, Giorgina, Gianni, Chris, Alfonso, Andrea, Genny, Rosa, Nicola, Carlo, Antonio. Grazie a tutte queste persone, molte delle quali appaiono in questa tesi sotto mentite spoglie, a Napoli ancora mi sento a casa.

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A chi non smette di prendersi cura e di credere che la cura sia politica, resistenza e la base di un altro mondo possibile. Spero che questa tesi possa essere un piccolo frammento di questa lotta.

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# Introduction

## 1. Care Is Everywhere, But What Does It Do?

Keys clinked as my friend Pietro, who had moved to Naples just a few months before, unlocked the heavy wooden door of Ex Asilo Filangieri and ushered me into the cavernous sixteenth-century monastery that Neapolitan activists and artists had occupied and transformed into an urban commons almost a decade earlier. It was a warm day in June 2021, and the COVID-19 pandemic still kept most activities on hold, including within l'Asilo. Nonetheless, Pietro guided me through the vast complex, through a chapel converted into a cinema, a spacious terrace with plants, a library with study rooms, an impressive theatre, a rich arts-and-crafts workshop. The few people we met while wandering greeted us warmly. On the main staircase, in full view, a large cardboard sign read “We dream of *caring* [emphasis added] spaces; sanitize all surfaces; share ideas to *take care* [emphasis added] of ourselves and others.” A small box invited visitors to leave their suggestions. As we left, I noticed a sheet by the entrance reminding everyone to keep the building a *spazio di cura* (space of care): “Let’s look for alternatives to guilt and fear. Let’s not isolate ourselves; instead, let’s collaborate to create a space of encounter, struggle, and love.” The notice concluded by inviting all to the Monday assembly at 7:00 p.m.<sup>2</sup>

These mentions of “care” did not surprise me. Throughout the previous year (and then, for the year that followed), the word *cura* (both “care” and “cure” in Italian) seemed everywhere in Italian left-wing movements. On March 13, 2020, only a few weeks after the Italian government imposed a national lockdown, multiple mutual aid brigades (*Brigate Volontarie per l’Emergenza*) formed in Milan and soon spread to other cities (Bernardi & Razzano, 2023), rallying under the motto *Cura! Solidarietà! Comunità!* (“Care! Solidarity! Community!”). Meanwhile, independent media outlets called on readers to “politicize care,” and the idea echoed across online meetings, assemblies, and webinars convened by both established and emerging movements. Some activists invoked care as the basis for demanding forms of Universal Basic Income, such as the *Reddito di Quarantena* (Quarantine Income) and BIN Italia campaigns, or, more explicitly, in the transnational call for a *Reddito di Cura* (Care Income). This international push found Italian allies and became part of a broader mobilization that connected economic justice and climate action. The Italian environmental movement, too, embraced care as a central frame: NO-TAV activists painted a large graffiti reading *La cura è*

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<sup>2</sup> Here and for the rest of the thesis, translations are mine.

*nella terra* (“The cure is in the land”) on a building in the Susa Valley and gave the same title to their annual festival in September 2020. The Venice Climate Camp called itself “a camp of common care”; its program opened with a plenary on “Climate crisis, economies, care.” In October 2020, a formal coalition of hundreds of social movement organizations released a manifesto titled *Uscire dall'economia del profitto, costruire la società della cura* (“Exit the profit economy, build the Care Society”) and adopted “Care Society” (*Società della Cura*) as both name and shared vision. That same year, the Assisi peace march advanced behind a banner reading I care; Verso’s *The Care Manifesto* was published and soon translated into Italian; and when 10,000 people marched against the G20 summit in Rome, their front banner proclaimed *voi la malattia, noi la cura* (“you the illness, we the cure”). As feminist activists of Non Una di Meno Roma explained in their manifesto *Life Beyond the Pandemic*, their wager was to “... extend care from singular bodies to that which allows them to persist: relations, ecosystems, the biosphere, the planet itself. This is the ground of encounter, and possible convergence, between feminist, transfeminist, and ecological movements” (2020, p. 113), and they concluded that “to stir up a potent response to devastating events, it is crucial to create new alliances of care in common,” because “containing the contagion is not enough; we need struggles for reconfiguring the infrastructures of care, taking control away from market forces” (2020, p. 113).

Walking with Pietro that first afternoon in Naples, we met Mario, a veteran activist of l’Asilo who spent dinner describing his utopia of carving out a “space of care” where militants could escape movement productivism. Yet my questions about how that “space of care” would operate in practice were briefly sidestepped: “It’s not me deciding; it needs to emerge from collective desire,” he replied, and similar arguments followed. The next morning in Scampia, a district too often reduced to Camorra<sup>3</sup> headlines, Mammut volunteers called their workshop with children, to which I participated, an act of “cura” for the neighborhood. By early evening we were back at l’Asilo for the Neapolitan Commune assembly, where older organizers linked bread-and-roses ideals to a universal basic income that would free time for care. The word surfaced again when fireworks above Mensa Occupata honored a comrade who had taken his own life; speakers framed the memorial as community care. At Santa Fede Liberata’s popular lunch an elder (that later I understood to be a quite legendary activist of the Neapolitan scene)

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<sup>3</sup> One of the most powerful mafia-type organized crime groups in Italy, particularly active in the Neapolitan area.

joked that ladling pasta was a form of care intended not to complement the state but to replace it, which he argued is the true purpose of commons. A late-night queer party raising funds for the alternative Pride featured a *kit di cura* (care kit). There I spoke with Giovanni, a younger activist who traced today's discourse of care to Non Una di Meno, praised l'Asilo's engagement with it, and cited Giardino Liberato's connection to the national Care Society network.

Every encounter returned to a single word: care. Care seemed everywhere in social movements, from the everyday at the local level to the manifestos of broad convergences. Theoretically, this ubiquity seemed understandable. Feminists have long argued that care is fundamental labor (Bhattacharya, 2017; Dalla Costa & James, 1975; Federici, 2020) and that it represents an emancipatory ethics (Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993). It is feminist, and it is ecological (Mellor, 1997; Mies & Shiva, 1993; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). It is queer, and it is crip (Eales & Peers, 2021; Kim & Schalk, 2021). It is intimate yet should be public (Tronto, 2013). It is key for constructing a welfare system that works (Daly, 2021; Dowling, 2021; Fraser, 2016a). It explains processes at the global level, such as global care chains and migration (Lutz, 2018; Yeates, 2012), but it also guides everyday politics within movements and immediate communities, during the pandemic and beyond (Chevée, 2022; Paulson et al., 2020; Reese & Johnson, 2022; Sitrin et al., 2020; Spade, 2020a).<sup>4</sup> Care matters across multiple temporal horizons: it is important towards the past (for example, the memorial I mentioned), shapes the present (as in l'Asilo's signs), and points toward the future (concern for children and generations to come). As it happens, care was also quickly mobilized by marketers of both public (governments) and private (companies) (Chatzidakis et al., 2020), yet radicals strove to keep it meaningful and even authored the widely read *Care Manifesto* (The Care Collective, 2020). What is certain is that this word is political, and it is experiencing an unprecedented boom. It suddenly carries enormous meaning for many people in diverse domains, much like other capacious political words such as freedom or democracy. Yet, despite extensive interdisciplinary scholarship, it remains unclear what care actually signifies for the activists who champion it. Do they invoke a specific theoretical lineage? Do they intend something else entirely? Or does the term carry different meanings for each person? And how are those meanings translated into practice?

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<sup>4</sup> A more complete review can be found in Chapter 1.

Progressive (or left-wing) movements<sup>5</sup> have historically propelled political change toward emancipation (Eley, 2002; Piven & Cloward, 1979; Tarrow, 2013). Consider freedom and democracy, which I referenced above; without progressive movements these ideas would remain abstract (della Porta & Rucht, 2013). Such movements act as societal vanguards for emancipatory concepts. Therefore, they are the logical site of inquiry when one seeks to clarify an emergent political concept. It became clear, then, that examining care as a political concept demands attention to progressive social movements. Studying the politicization of care, in turn, involves analyzing both language and practice. Although I was repeatedly urged to choose between discourse and practice, I declined, convinced that every political concept is simultaneously linguistic imagery and embodied routine. What interests me most is their relationship. Words and practices intertwine dialectically in shifting, sometimes contradictory, even conflictual ways. Words challenge practices, and practices critique words. I therefore approach care within this messiness: as neither pure language nor pure practice.

Indeed, recent scholarship tends to treat care in social movements either as language or as practice. On the linguistic side, Italian studies identify care as a bridging frame during the pandemic (della Porta, 2022; della Porta & Lavizzari, 2022), and a way to frame solidarity in campaigns focused on migration, housing and health care (Caciagli & della Porta, 2025), as well as in refugee solidarity activism (Milan & Martini, 2024). On the practical side, scholars describe certain solidarity processes themselves as forms of care (Santos, 2024). Yet, to the best of my knowledge, no work has examined the process unfolding at the historical time in which progressive social movement actors started framing care as their central political concept. What did “care” *do* to social movements, and what did social movements *do* with care?

## **2. Why Study Care Ethnographically**

Answering such complex, practice-and-language questions required sustained, day-to-day engagement with social movements. Hence I adopted an ethnographic approach and constructed care itself as my “ethnographic object” (Jensen & Auyero, 2019). Because movements pass through latent and contentious phases, identifying actors with whom I could spend extended, reasonably stable periods was not straightforward. After reflection, I chose to focus on specific cities and on those social movement spaces that function as infrastructure for

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<sup>5</sup> While progress is a contested concept, I follow Offe in using progressive as a synonym of emancipation (2019)

contentious politics: places where activists from different organizations meet and collaborate even when no major mobilization is under way. Often occupied, these venues have been labeled autonomous social centers, squats, free spaces, or community spaces. The most productive concept for this study, however, is the one of “urban commons”, describing urban systems organized around a commonwealth that is produced, used, and governed not privately nor by the state, but collectively and democratically by a community, in a conflictual movement away from capital toward autonomy (Feinberg et al., 2021; Huron, 2015; Polko, 2025). I chose the term *urban commons* first because the growing commons scholarship offers essential analytical lenses, not least for being fruitfully connected with the concept of care, itself understood as a commons as well as an integral activity of commons (Zechner, 2021; Dengler & Lang, 2022; Federici, 2018); and second, because the initial site of my fieldwork (l’Asilo) explicitly defines itself this way, signaling from the outset an intentional engagement with political concepts that proved equally crucial for care.

In parallel, although many activists, organizations, and movements engaged with l’Asilo at different times, I found it helpful to treat the day-to-day work of managing an urban commons as a distinct form of activism. Throughout this thesis I therefore use the term “commons movements,” defined as “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). Building on this idea, I extend the notion of commons movements to the urban scale and refer to these configurations as *urban commons movements*. The label is not exclusive; such spaces are almost always animated by activists from other movements (antifascist, feminist, environmentalist, and so on). Yet, clarifying the focus on urban commons movements specifies this research does not examine the politicization of care in any social movement nor another specific one. My guiding question is therefore straightforward: How do urban commons movements articulate and practice the concept of care?

To answer this question, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in two cities: Naples, already introduced above, and Barcelona. Naples offers a paradigmatic case of a commons movement, partly because activists there share a clear collective identity, a core feature of social movements (Della Porta & Diani, 2020). Commons activists in Naples have identified themselves as such since the frame gained traction during the anti-austerity cycle of the 2010s. Since then, the movement has defended water as a commons (Mattei, 2013), occupied multiple

buildings and secured their formal recognition as commons by local institutions (Micciarelli, 2017), and is now leading campaigns to reclaim the coastline as commons (Pica, 2024). Comparable dynamics have surfaced in Barcelona. There, commons practices developed as a social outcome of the movement of the squares (Varvarousis et al., 2021). Activists have reclaimed urban infrastructures as commons (Varo et al., 2023), and ecologies of reproductive urban commons continue to expand (Ruiz Cayuela & García-Lamarca, 2023). The commons frame later became closely tied to a single political party and, as a result, lost some prominence among grassroots groups. Even so, scholars have counted 364 urban commons in the city (Ferrerri et al., 2025), and these spaces occupy a key place in Barcelona's movement landscape, forming rhizomatic assemblages (Bianchi, 2025). These features explain my choice of Naples and Barcelona as fields (but the reader can find a more detailed case-selection logic in Chapter 2).

I first lived in Naples for 10 months (October 2021 through July 2022), participating each day in a wide range of activities in and around l'Asilo, an influential urban commons that anchors this introduction. I then moved to Barcelona for another 10 months (October 2022 through July 2023) and, after several weeks of exploration, immersed myself in the everyday life of Àgora Juan Andrés Benitez, a squatted garden in the Raval neighborhood. As the reader will discover in the pages that follow, this second site provides a stark contrast to the first. Rather than conducting a comparison grounded in a positivist search for measurable variables and external generalizability, I engage in an ethnographic comparison (Simmons & Smith, 2019). More precisely, it is a sequential comparison: I first abductively identified key puzzles in Naples, then chose the Barcelona case in light of the emerging theoretical themes (Tavory & Timmermans, 2020). During my fieldwork at l'Asilo, I explored how "care" diffused as a contested political keyword, widely described as absent in practice and therefore pulled into the center of debate (Chapter 4), and how this dispute led activists to devise what I call deliberative care infrastructuring (Chapter 5). To balance this strong focus on discourse, I selected a markedly different urban commons in Barcelona, Àgora, where conceptual debates were minimal. In this setting care was present but tacit and embodied, a pattern I trace to class dynamics (Chapter 6); these dynamics, in turn, shaped a distinct form of boundary work with the neighborhood (Chapter 7). Because of this design, the two cases are represented unevenly in the dissertation: l'Asilo occupies the first two empirical chapters, and the final two rely on comparative analysis. A further reason for the imbalance is that the physical scale, activist

numbers, frequency of activities and discussions, and thus the amount of analytically relevant data I could collect, differed between the sites.

Together with participant observation, my primary method (105,000 words of field notes), this ethnography also draws on 16 audio-recorded, in-depth interviews with key activists (10 in Naples, six in Barcelona), the analysis of more than 150,000 words of messages in group chats, and several activist methods consistent with its militant ethnographic approach. By militant ethnography I mean a “politically engaged form of participant observation carried out from within, rather than outside, grassroots movements” (Juris, 2007, p. 164). As part of this commitment, I co-designed a 48-response survey to address what activists called the “care crisis” of l’Asilo; I shot a participatory video at Àgora that was screened during the tenth-anniversary celebrations of the occupation; and I assumed responsibility for a collaborative gardening project at Àgora in spring and summer 2023. After fieldwork, an abductive loop linked fieldwork and theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), crystallizing in multilevel coding categories that helped me organize 2,697 coded segments of data in MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis program.

My position as a White, cisgender, heterosexual, nondisabled, Southern European man with a middle-class upbringing and a doctoral training confers structural privileges that influence what I notice and how I interpret it. Guided by feminist standpoint theory, I treat this study as a situated inquiry and use reflexivity to keep my analyses accountable (S. G. Harding, 2004; hooks, 2015). A decade of participation in student, migrant-solidarity, ecological, and commons movements gives me empirical access, reminds me of my blind spots, and locates me as a participant who must answer to those being studied. Grounded in a relational ontology informed by feminist ethics of care, I view knowledge as co-created through interdependence and dialogue rather than detached observation. Working with Southern European commons movements to which I have some personal ties, yet enough distance for analytic estrangement, helps me mitigate the colonial tendencies often associated with ethnography. By making these coordinates explicit, I invite readers to judge my interpretations with full awareness of their partial nature and to read the thesis as a situated, accountable contribution to debates on care in contemporary social movements.

Finally, I disclose that my motive in undertaking this study is to bring into view, and to constructively dissect, problematize, and critique, what stirs me politically: a mode of

collective action grounded in an ethos that recognizes and directly addresses others' emotional and material needs, treating care as society's primary value-creating activity. I refer to this ideal-typical, theory-derived construct as *radical care politics*, and its quandaries lie at the heart of the thesis. My aim is not to prove that radical care politics already exists exactly as defined; rather, I investigate the challenges social movements encounter when they attempt to move in that direction.

### **3. Defining Care, Class, Commoning, And Infrastructuring**

Before proceeding, the reader may find it helpful to review several core concepts. To trace how urban commons movements live, debate, and dispute "care," the thesis also relies on four intertwined ideas: value, class, commoning, and infrastructuring. Because care is the ethnographic object of this dissertation, I do not propose a single prescriptive definition; instead, I examine what the term comes to mean for the actors themselves and treat it as a semantically unstable, contested political keyword (R. Williams, 2014a). Epistemologically, care pivots between worry (which signals vulnerability and grief) and attentiveness (a deliberate orientation to another's needs). In the social sciences, care is analyzed either in terms of value, as labor (for example, the cooking, calming, and mending that keep bodies, minds, and ecologies capable of anything else), or in terms of values, as a normative stance that recasts discussions of justice and ethics. Throughout the thesis, it emerges as a quarrelsome keyword whose meanings constantly vacillate between burden and commitment. Within commons movements, collective decision-making, gardening, and protesting are moments where value-making labor meets values-laden judgment. Following David Graeber, I treat value and values within a single framework of how people decide what matters. Value is created and expressed through action and through people's own narratives, rather than functioning as an abstract metric. For Graeber, value marks the point where structure (shared symbols, institutions, and histories) and agency (individual desires and intentions) intersect (Graeber, 2001).

Class is best understood as an abstraction of value, or, more precisely, "a dynamic process that positions people in struggles for value and life" (Skeggs et al., 2022, p. 192), and it is always structured by gender and race. This dimension is a key force that shapes how care is articulated and practiced and how it is enabled or recognized. Drawing on Bourdieu's practice theory, Graeber's anthropology of value, and Skeggs's feminist analysis of class, I treat class as a relational social position in which uneven bundles of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic

capital crystallize into a *habitus*, the taken-for-granted dispositions that guide action and perception (Bourdieu, 1987). Class also operates as a hierarchy of values and recognition: dominant groups define what and whose work, lifestyles, or credentials count as “valuable,” while subordinated groups often find their caring labor devalued or stigmatized (Skeggs 1997, 2011). This value-centered and practice-informed perspective highlights how access to, and credit for, care are themselves stratified (Graeber 2001). Hence, in this thesis, class denotes a relational social position constituted by unequal configurations of capital, mediated through *habitus*, and organized through power to decide whose actions and ways of life hold value.

Having explained how value and class are entangled by actions, I now concentrate on the core activity that sustains urban commons. These spaces are not fixed resources; they rely on ongoing collective labor. In this sense, “commons” functions as a verb (Linebaugh, 2008) and refers to a *praxis* that is

...characterised by modes of production, distribution and governance of the commons that are participatory and non-hierarchical, motivated by the values of the commons (re)production, of the (re)production of commoners’ commonwealth and of the affective, material, immaterial and cultural (re)production of the commoners and their relations (De Angelis, 2017a).

As the reader might anticipate, the relationship among care, class, and commoning is deep and intimate. Federici shows how working-class (often female) actors rely on “reproductive commons,” such as collective gardens and communal kitchens (for example, *Àgora*), to survive austerity and state withdrawal (Federici, 2018), and De Angelis argues that commoning is the terrain where alternative value logics confront capitalist value (De Angelis, 2010). Velicu and García-Lopez, bridging Ostrom with Butler, further underline that commoning is “a relational politics that engages with humans’ boundedness and mutual vulnerability as well as with the performativity of such subjectivities” (2018). It is evident that, taken together, care, class, and commoning form a tightly woven braid.

Finally, infrastructuring can be seen as the multilayered material and symbolic processes that keep this braid together. Because collective care must be organized in space and time, the idea of infrastructure is useful here, not as a static backdrop of pipes or bylaws, but as forms of life made out of social relations: arrangements that enable some ways of being while foreclosing others (Berlant, 2016). Drawing on Science and Technology Studies, I treat infrastructure as

relational, processual, and political: it is continuously remade, situated, and distributed unequally, granting access or imposing exclusion along classed, gendered, and racialized lines (Star & Bowker, 2002). Defined as the ongoing activity of building, repairing, and adapting shared systems, infrastructuring makes visible care in motion, class in tension, and commoning in practice. I do not look at commons *as* infrastructures (Berlant, 2016), but at different infrastructures that make the urban commons I study, where activists “care with” others (Alam & Houston, 2020) by weaving facilitation, conflict mediation, and mutual aid into the everyday fabric of self-management. The concept therefore remains intimately connected to articulations and practices of care, the stratifications of class, and the collective verb of commoning in a single continuous, contested process.

#### **4. Contribution and Boundaries of the Thesis**

This thesis addresses the identified gap—namely, the lack of research on the politicization of care in the dialectics between discourse and practice by progressive social movements amid the polycrisis—through an ethnographic examination of how care is politically articulated and enacted within urban commons movements. Focusing on l’Asilo in Naples and Àgora in Barcelona, it shows how activists define, debate, perform, and embed care in shared infrastructure amid social and political tensions. Immersive fieldwork offers empirical and theoretical insight into care’s political work at the intersection of language, ethics, and practice.

Methodologically, this research underscores the value of long-term, theory-building ethnography based primarily on participant observation. It demonstrates how ethnographic immersion allows for nuanced and grounded insights into complex social movements’ processes. Additionally, the thesis contributes significantly to militant ethnography by showcasing innovative participatory methods (such as survey co-design, participatory video production, and collaborative gardening) that provide activist communities tangible benefits beyond conventional academic outputs and thereby bridge scholarly rigor and political commitment.

In social movement scholarship, care is usually treated as either ethics or labor, whereas this dissertation links the two and presents care as a contested ethos of collective action. It makes a distinctive contribution to studies of social movement diffusion (Soule & Roggeband, 2018) by showing how “care” has emerged as a critical and contentious term within everyday activist

discourse and practice. The analysis also uncovers how such keywords can spread through claims of absence or critique rather than simple affirmation. At l'Asilo, as I will show, care became a central object of contestation, critique, and deliberation precisely because activists perceived it as insufficiently enacted in practice.

Moreover, I introduce the concept of *deliberative care infrastructuring* to theorize how urban-commons movements translate care from ethical ideals into structured practices during crises such as COVID-19 or internal governance challenges. By contrasting this approach with *prefigurative spontaneity*, I show how activists balance the wish to keep mutual aid spontaneous and horizontal with the need to create minimal protocols. By the end of the thesis, I build a four-fold typology of care infrastructures (discursive, organizational, embodied, and boundary care), which systematizes the comparative findings.

An additional and innovative contribution is the analysis of class, a largely understudied theme within social movement literature: existing scholarship has primarily examined class in structural or demographic terms, often overlooking its embodied, cultural, and affective dimensions. My thesis addresses this critical gap by analyzing how activists' class backgrounds profoundly influence the ways care is articulated, recognized, and enacted. Through comparative ethnographic analysis, I show that care practices differ markedly between l'Asilo's predominantly intellectual, discursive approaches and Àgora's embodied, everyday material practices, which are deeply shaped by working-class and migrant experiences.

This thesis advances commons research in three interlocking ways. First, it offers ethnographic depth on everyday care within commons settings, showing care in concrete actions and relationships rather than in abstract idealizations, an aspect seldom examined despite frequent theoretical attention. Second, it demonstrates that practices of care and commoning differ markedly across class positions, thereby adding class as a critical analytic lens to the study of commons. Third, it enriches debates on commons boundaries by tracing how activists balance the need for clear limits with the aspiration for openness; boundary work itself emerges as a demanding form of care.

These findings converse with three broader literatures. From feminist democratic theory, the study adopts the view that a polity should be evaluated by how it distributes caring responsibilities rather than by formal rights alone. From science and technology studies, it takes

the insight that every social world rests on often unseen infrastructures and asks what happens when activists attempt to design those infrastructures in public. From anarchist traditions, it draws the principle that politics is enacted directly, without reliance on distant authorities to provide life's essentials.

By explicitly detailing these contributions, the thesis transparently outlines its empirical scope, theoretical ambitions, and methodological innovations. Here, I clearly delineate its boundaries, emphasizing that, as an ethnographic study, it is not meant to describe the workings of social phenomena in a way that is representative of how those phenomena unfold elsewhere. Rather, it seeks to understand in detail, and build theory on, social phenomena that happen in specific places and at specific times (that is, my cases during fieldwork) yet may be transferable to other contexts, for which my analysis offers hypotheses. First, as anticipated, this thesis does not exhaustively reveal how care work is distributed in these urban commons. I observe care work, hear care speech, and read events through the lens of care, but I do not systematically, much less quantitatively, map care flows. Second, the thesis is not exhaustive in cataloging every possible way care is politicized within urban commons movements or other movements; I analyze only the pathways that surfaced in my fieldwork. Third, I do not aim to contribute specifically to feminist theories on care; feminist scholars have already advanced that debate from more situated positions. Instead, I draw on their insights to illuminate care as an ethnographic object in urban commons activism. Fourth, the comparison is between cases within cities, not between Naples and Barcelona themselves; *l'Asilo* and *Àgora* exemplify different configurations rather than representing their cities as wholes. Fifth, temporal boundaries matter. Fieldwork captures a moment when pandemic restrictions still colored everyday life, but vaccines and reopened borders had begun to reshape assembly routines. Earlier histories are reconstructed through archives and veteran interviews, yet the analytic weight falls on 2021–2023, and claims outside that window remain provisional. Finally, the ethnography privileges those who attend assemblies or volunteer for time-consuming tasks, inevitably overlooking more casual visitors who drop by for a concert or a free meal.

Together, this thesis shows that during the pandemic progressive activists made care their central idiom, then faced the task of giving it substance. At *l'Asilo* the effort relied on talk, surveys, and facilitation tools; at *Àgora* it relied on gardening, cleaning, and face-to-face trust. Four interlocking infrastructures (discursive, organizational, embodied, and boundary) keep each commons alive while exposing tensions rooted in class. Tracking how these

infrastructures emerge, overlap, and strain clarifies what care does to social movements and what movements do with care, offering scholars and organizers a grounded lens to see which dimensions of care thrive, which falter, and why.

## **5. Structure Of The Dissertation**

The body of the dissertation unfolds as follows. Chapter 1 lays the theoretical foundations of the thesis by conceptualizing radical care politics as an ethos of collective action centered on addressing emotional and material needs, identifying care as the fundamental value-generating activity within society. It examines care's semantic history and political significance, situating it within feminist, Marxist, and commons traditions. Finally, the chapter looks at care and collective action and introduces key analytical tools to frame the empirical analyses developed throughout subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 explains the methodological framework, grounding the research in a militant ethnographic design informed by feminist ethics of care and relational ontology. It outlines a comparative ethnography conducted through sixteen months of immersive participant observation at l'Asilo (Naples) and Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez (Barcelona), complemented by sixteen semi-structured interviews, activist co-produced methods (survey, participatory video, collaborative gardening), archival research, and a historical semantic analysis of "care." The chapter emphasizes reflexivity, positionality, and ethical considerations integral to generating situated, relational, and politically engaged knowledge.

Chapter 3 introduces and contextualizes the two ethnographic cases, l'Asilo and Àgora. Situated in dense, historically marginalized Mediterranean neighborhoods, both sites exemplify urban commons movements embedded within rich legacies of grassroots resistance. The chapter explores Naples' and Barcelona's histories of struggle and autonomy, highlighting how local traditions of anarchism, labor movements, squatting, and municipalist experiments have shaped contemporary commons activism. L'Asilo and Àgora emerge not only as spaces of radical care but as continuations of these long-standing urban traditions of self-organization and insurgent politics.

Chapter 4 explores the contested political language of "care" through an ethnographic analysis of l'Asilo. It traces how the term "care" entered activist discourse during the Covid-19

pandemic, heavily influenced by feminist movements. Despite widespread invocation, “care” remained ambiguous and contested, with tensions emerging around its perceived superficial use (“carewashing”) and uneven gendered labor divisions. The chapter illustrates how debates around care, although often reflecting its absence or superficial treatment, became powerful vehicles for feminist critique and gradual depatriarchalization of activist practices at l’Asilo.

Chapter 5 analyzes how the ethical ideal of care transitioned from spontaneous mutualism to structured governance through the concept of “deliberative care infrastructuring” at l’Asilo. Focusing on the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent internal crises, the chapter illustrates the tensions between radical openness and the practical necessity of structuring care to prevent burnout and inequality, particularly gendered labor divisions. The introduction of feminist facilitation and a participatory survey emerge as pivotal interventions, showing how activists collectively negotiated and embedded care into governance practices without losing their commitment to horizontality and prefigurative spontaneity.

Chapter 6 comparatively analyzes how class shapes care practices in l’Asilo and Àgora. The chapter contrasts l’Asilo’s discursive, consensus-based model, marked by intellectual debates and implicit class privileges, with Àgora’s embodied, informal, and direct practices of care, shaped by working-class and migrant marginalization. The analysis reveals that class profoundly influences whose voices are heard, which forms of care are recognized, and how democratic participation is experienced and structured in each commons.

Chapter 7 examines how urban commons activists manage care and boundaries in relation to their surrounding neighborhoods, focusing on l’Asilo and Àgora. It explores activists’ dilemmas around openness, security, and exclusion, highlighting the tension between the ideal of porous communities and the practical necessity to maintain safe and inclusive spaces. Through ethnographic analysis, the chapter shows how activists negotiate care boundaries, confronting classed and intersectional hierarchies and responding to neighborhood marginalization and violence with everyday practices of care, improvisation, and ethical reflection.

The conclusion develops the dissertation’s central argument through a typology of care infrastructures, offering a conceptual synthesis of how care is politicized in l’Asilo and Àgora. It defines four types of social infrastructures (discursive, organizational, embodied, and

boundary) and shows how each site enacts care through distinct configurations. The conclusion highlights how these infrastructures interact, overlap, and at times conflict, shaping the possibilities and limits of care in urban commons movements. It outlines the thesis' contributions to social movement studies, feminist political theory, and commons scholarship. I close by reflecting on the significance of care as a situated and essential political practice shaped by inequalities and contradictions, and propose future research directions on care in relation to rural commons, global hierarchies, methodological combinations, and more-than-human infrastructures.

# Chapter 1

## Care Politics, Commoning, And Social Movements

*If we are not, in fact, calculating individuals trying to accumulate the maximum possible quantities of power, pleasure, and material wealth, then what, precisely, are we?*

David Graeber, *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value* (2001, p. xii)

### 1. Introduction

In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical framework of this thesis, establishing the foundations for defining radical care politics. I conceptualize radical care politics as *a kind of politics founded on an ethos of collective action that recognizes and directly addresses others' emotional and material needs, treating care as the primary value-generating activity within society*. This definition is explicitly ideal-typical rather than empirical: it does not describe the messy complexity of social reality directly but instead provides a conceptual lens through which we can clearly discern and analyze specific key features of collective caring practices. Its theoretical foundations, articulated throughout this chapter, offer tools to identify and interpret radical care politics empirically. Indeed, the empirical analyses developed in subsequent chapters (4, 5, 6, and 7) not only aim to demonstrate that radical care politics embodies a distinct ethos of collective action, but, crucially, to illuminate and complicate this model by contrasting it with lived experiences: the nuanced, unpredictable practices through which activists navigate language (Ch. 4) and ethics (Ch. 5), the textured realities shaped by classed differences (Ch. 6), and the complex negotiations surrounding issues like boundaries, security, and violence (Ch. 7).

The chapter proceeds in five sections. In Section 1, I explore what care has to do with politics by unpacking its complex semantic history and dual significance as value and values. Drawing on Raymond Williams' cultural materialist analysis of political keywords, I trace the historical evolution of "care" from its etymological roots in sorrow and solicitude to its politicization through feminist and autonomous Marxist traditions. I show how care has become a contentious political keyword, mobilized during critical historical junctures (from 1970s feminist struggles to contemporary polycrises) and how its semantic instability reveals deeper cultural tensions. Building on David Graeber's anthropological theory of value, I argue that care must be understood both as a form of labor that produces value and as an ethical orientation

that shapes political world-making. This dual framework, of care as value-creating labor and care as relational ethics, grounds my theoretical approach to radical care politics as simultaneously material, symbolic, and political. At the end of Section 1, the importance of value(s) for class, and of class for care, is given theoretical grounding. In Section 2, I examine the conceptual and practical intersections between care and commoning. Drawing on critical commons literature and feminist social reproduction theory, I show how commons, understood as dynamic social processes rather than static resources, offer fertile ground for practicing care politics. Urban commons, in particular, emerge as spaces where activists reclaim space, build solidaristic infrastructures, and organize care beyond both market and state. Here, commoning is framed as a material and relational practice that resists commodification while sustaining collective autonomy. In Section 3, I show how radical care politics emerges as an ethos of collective action, grounded in everyday practices that sustain life materially and relationally. Drawing on feminist and anarchist traditions, I explore how care is enacted through direct action, mutual aid, and prefigurative politics, each emphasizing immediacy, horizontality, and experimentation. In Section 4, I deepen this discussion by anticipating two conceptual tools (prefigurative spontaneity and deliberative care infrastructuring) which I have developed specifically to interpret the case of l'Asilo. These concepts are proposed as situated contributions to understanding governance approaches and processes that are specific to l'Asilo but that can be transferrable to other contexts. Drawing from feminist care ethics, social reproduction theory, and Science and Technology Studies, I conceptualize as a political and infrastructural practice: something collectively assembled, sustained, and contested. Finally, in Section 5, I look at how Social Movement Studies have employed the very concept of care so far, and how this thesis builds on, but differs from, existing studies. The task of theory, in this chapter, is to craft conceptual tools capable of engaging with the contradictions, ambiguities, and creative tensions that surface when care becomes central to urban commons movements.

## **2. What Does Care Have to Do with Politics? Language, Value, and Values**

What does care have to do with politics? To begin answering this question, the meaning of care must first be approached: what it names, what it evokes, and how it has come to matter politically. Before it can be theorized as value or values, care must be recognized as a word with a complex and shifting history, shaped by mythologies, shifting cultural meanings, and ideological struggles. Like many politically charged terms, care is a contested word: its meanings have evolved across time and context, particularly in the wake of feminist

movements and critiques of capitalism. Tracing its semantic and historical trajectories reveals how care can simultaneously evoke private affection, capitalist neglect, and revolutionary solidarity, and why its political force depends on how it is mobilized, reclaimed, and re-signified.

In this first section, then, I begin not with a fixed definition, but with an inquiry into the language of care. Following the methodological tradition of analyzing politically charged terms as historical and cultural keywords, this inquiry seeks to uncover how care's meanings have been shaped, stretched, and contested across time. Care is not an innocent word. It can name a burden, a feeling, a set of acts, an attitude, a form of labor. It can function as a verb, a noun, or an adjective. It can be individual or collective, relational or systemic. One can care for, care about, take care of, give care, or receive it. It can be understood as nurturing, as dependence, as power, or as resistance. It appears in the language of social services, in feminist manifestos, in corporate management strategies, in colonial humanitarianism, and in radical politics.

As a term, care is both emotionally evocative and semantically unstable. Precisely for this reason, it demands sustained attention. The following pages trace its etymological roots and mythological associations, examining how its meanings have shifted across time and political contexts. This groundwork lays the foundation for theorizing care as both value and values: not only as an ethical imperative, but as a form of labor and a generator of social, economic, and political life.

## **2.1 Historical Insights on Care as Political Keyword**

Words are fundamental for politics, and their role in it has been studied extensively and interdisciplinary in the social sciences, revealing their tortuous historical paths and resulting polysemy and ambiguity. The fundamental reference here is Raymond Williams, with his seminal work *Keywords: a vocabulary of culture and society* (2014b) (first published in 1975). Daniel Rodgers then borrowed the term from Williams to investigate the trajectories of seven keywords in US politics (1998). Drawing more systematically from Williams' cultural materialist approach, Moran theorized keywords as method (2021). In addition, many works focused on more specific languages or words, such as E.P. Thompson renowned work on the language of labor (2013), Kammen's book on "liberty" (1986), or more recent works such as Graeber's on "democracy" (2007b), de Dijn's on "freedom" (2020), and Moran's on "identity" (2015).

“Care” was not included in William’s vocabulary, nor has it ever been specifically analyzed as political language. This absence raises a crucial question: can “care” be considered a political keyword today? To answer this, I first provide a brief account of its semantic evolution, tracing how its meaning has shifted in response to social, cultural, economic, and political changes. This includes an exploration of its mythological and philological origins, which reveal the enduring tension between sorrow/worry and nurturing/disposition, two meanings still present in its contemporary usage.

Despite being a considerably broad and polysemic concept, the main senses of the term have remained remarkably stable throughout the centuries. “Care” is one of the oldest English words<sup>6</sup> and it incorporates two primary meanings: “care” as *sorrow, grief, trouble, and lament*; and care as *concern* and *attention toward* someone or something. The first meaning (now obsolete)<sup>7</sup> dates to the 10<sup>th</sup> century and it is semantically connected to the Proto-Indo-European etymological root of care as a *shout, call, or scream*.<sup>8</sup> This early sense of care as burden and distress underscores its deep connection to human suffering. Whereas “care” as a burdened state of mind derives from this primary meaning, the secondary and contemporary meaning of “care” as concern and taking charge of someone or something emerged in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century.

Although the second meaning is more commonly associated with care today, both have remained present throughout its semantic evolution. Most contentious words indeed derive from ordinary speech and popular folktales (Tarrow, 2013), and this is also the case for “care” and the dialectic between its two primary meanings. This duality (care as both suffering and responsibility) is not merely a historical curiosity but, as it will become evident, a defining characteristic of its contemporary political significance. Indeed, it also has spiritual and religious significance, as it can be traced back to Greco-Roman myths. The Roman poet Virgil depicted “vengeful Cares” as burdensome forces at the entrance to the underworld, symbolizing how care can weigh humans down. In contrast, the philosopher Seneca viewed care as a powerful force that elevates humans, because in God, the good is perfected simply by his

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<sup>6</sup> Quotation evidence from around the year 1000 (first cited in Paris Psalter). This is one of the earliest 2% of entries recorded in Oxford English Dictionary.

<sup>7</sup> Oxford English Dictionary

<sup>8</sup> <https://etymologeek.com/ang/caru>

nature, but in humans, the good is perfected by care (*cura*), which for Seneca mainly meant solicitude (Seneca, 1953).

Among the most ancient tales is the little-known Greco-Roman myth of the goddess *Cura*<sup>9</sup>, as written by Igino. Fascinatingly, the myth also encompasses both meanings and gives a sense of why they are deeply connected. *Cura* was a goddess who was responsible for creating the first human being. The story goes that one day, while crossing a river, *Cura* picked up a handful of clay and began to mold it into a human shape. As she was shaping the figure, Jupiter (the king of the gods) came by, and *Cura* asked him to give life to the figure, which he did. However, a dispute arose over who should have the naming rights and ownership of this new creation. *Cura* claimed that she should have authority over the human because she was the one who formed it. Jupiter, who provided the spirit (or soul), also claimed ownership. Then, *Tellus* (the Earth), who provided the body, claimed that the human should belong to her. To settle the dispute, Saturn, the god of time, was called to arbitrate. Saturn decided that since Jupiter gave the spirit, the human would belong to him in death; since *Tellus* provided the body, the human would return to her in death; but during life, the human would be under the care of *Cura*. Furthermore, Saturn ruled that the human would be named “Homo,” deriving from *humus* (earth), because it was made from the earth. This myth underscores that life and human existence cannot be sustained without care, and that its nature is both the one of a creative force and an ongoing responsibility (Reich, 1995).

Also in the spiritual realm, the concept of “souls care”, from Latin *cura animorum*, meaning pastoral action (*cura* means priest in Spanish), dates back to the Bible. Interestingly enough, the Latin and Italian word *cura* have a different Indo-European etymology: they originate from “Ku = Kau Kav”, meaning “to observe”.<sup>10</sup> In this case, then, the etymology is tilted towards the transitive (attention towards the other) meaning; however, as we can read in the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* (“Grand Dictionary of Italian Language”), also in Italian literature the meaning of “sorrow”, “grief” and “pain” is present, yet virtually absent in today’s common language.

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly enough, the latin word ‘cura’ has different etymology from care, but virtually the same main meanings.

<sup>10</sup> [www.etimo.it](http://www.etimo.it)

Despite the remarkable stability of these main meanings, the term has acquired several new connotations in adapting to socioeconomic transformations across its millennial history. As a political concept, care has been used with reference to protection (hence rule, government) since at least c1540. Or, coinciding with the rise of capitalism, it has started to be used to indicate charge over or disposal of property and money. “Care” in relation to medical health, instead, is older in Italian (around 1300) than in English (around 1600), but this use has become widespread only in the second half of the last century. The term “carer” is now widely used in the UK, Australia, New Zealand, India, and other former colonies, but it remains relatively unfamiliar in the USA and Canada (Fine, 2007). Indeed, over 200 years ago, “carer” referred to someone who was excessively worried, what we might now describe as a neurotic individual (Rummery & Fine, 2012). The modern use of the term began in Britain in the late 1970s, when it was applied to women who were excluded from public life because of their unpaid roles as caregivers for elderly or disabled relatives or spouses (Barnes, 2001).

Terms like “carer”, together with “care-worker” and “caregiver”, are what allowed for care to be politicized in the 70s by autonomous Marxist feminists, who underlined the role of care as value-creating work. Subsequently, the ethics of care, developed in the anglophone world in the 80s and soon connected to politics, related to a much wider understanding of care.<sup>11</sup> Importantly, the double “positive” and “negative” connotations of care remain fundamentally present up until contemporary feminist theory, which highlights how care can be both an extremely heavy and unjustly assigned burden *and* a feminist ethical principle around which to restructure society.

In terms of volume (how much the term has been used), “care” has been employed quite stably throughout history, except for a significant increase precisely around the second half of the last century, coinciding with feminist conceptualizations of the concept. Given the renewed emphasis on care in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the latest feminist wave, one could hypothesize that its frequency has surged even further, though this remains to be confirmed by linguistic data.

In the account above one can appreciate the relative stability in the meaning of care despite its millennial history. Yet, important changes in meaning shall not be ignored. If we consider that

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<sup>11</sup> A more extensive review of feminist ‘care’ can be found in Chapter 1.

a word originally meaning “sorrow” has now become central to contemporary political struggles (particularly those of feminist and social justice movements) this transformation becomes all the more striking. And yet “over time the meanings of words change, merge, divide, and diffuse” (Tarrow 2013, p. 12). As “care” has gradually diverged from its original meaning, it has gained increasing complexity, as shown in the rest of this chapter. This aligns with Sapir’s (1934) concept of a “condensation symbol,” a term that encompasses multiple meanings, with these meanings expanding as the concept or practice moves further from its original form. Tarrow argues that this process is characteristic of all contentious words (2013); but can “care” be considered a contentious word?

## **2.2 Care as a Contentious Keyword**

The possibility of analyzing the language of “care” as contentious language rests considering radical care politics as contentious. While traditional definitions of “contentious politics” placed a heavy weight on claim-making towards governments, it is admitted that “roughly translated, ...[it]... refers to collective political struggle” (McAdam et al., 2001, p. 4). As a result, the boundaries of what is considered contentious have gotten less rigid, as scholars have recognized new forms of collective action as legitimate repertoires. Hence, new repertoires of collective action have been analyzed with the categories of contentious politics, such as food commoning (Aguari, 2024), or the experimentation with alternative epistemological frameworks (della Porta & Pavan, 2017). In this sense, radical care politics and its language can be considered contentious.

In this chapter, I operationalize “contentious” following Tarrow (2013) and others who see conflict, negotiation, and political struggle (not limited to direct claims on the state) as defining characteristics of contentious action. “Care” becomes contentious when it provokes debates over power, distribution of labor, or the meaning of radical politics. Tarrow (2013) argues that changes in contentious language emerge from “critical historical junctures” (Collier & Collier, 1991) or, in his terms, from “cycles of contention.” Indeed, the politicization of care first gained prominence during the 1970s cycle of contention in Italy, specifically with the ideas of Autonomous Marxist feminism. More recently, shifts in the political significance of care appear to be driven by several interlocking critical historical junctures and relative cycles of contention: the Covid19 pandemic, which gave rise to mobilizations such as mutual aid initiatives (della Porta, 2022); the global socio-ecological and climate crisis, along with the cycle of contention initiated by climate justice movements 2018–19 (Imperatore & Leonardi,

2023); and the increasing awareness of the care crisis, amplified by a surge in feminist mobilizations, increasingly identified as part of the fourth wave of feminism (Munro, 2013). Some authors have referred to the current global state of interlocking crises as the “polycrisis” (Henig & Knight, 2023; Lawrence et al., 2024; Tooze, 2022). Notably, the feminist movement has long emphasized “care” as a site of gendered struggle, from wage-for-housework campaigns in the 1970s to contemporary transfeminist mobilizations. These genealogies amplify the contentiousness of “care,” as it is not merely a moral or private matter but a foundation for broader societal transformations.

The contentious nature of care is also evident in how movements create new terminology to articulate political struggles. In Spain, feminist precarity movements coined the neologism *cuidadania* (caretizenship) in the early 2000s, a play on *ciudadanía* (citizenship) and *cuidado* (care), which emerged from activist debates on precarity, migration, and social rights. According to Casas-Cortés (Casas-Cortes, 2019), the term originated from a serendipitous misspelling of *ciudadanía*, which transformed its root from “city” to “care,” symbolizing a shift in the concept of political belonging. *Cuidadania* proposes an alternative form of citizenship based on interdependence, mutual support, and collective responsibility rather than exclusionary state structures. It has been used to critique the erosion of welfare protections and the restrictive nature of conventional citizenship, positioning care as central to struggles against precarity, migration restrictions, and gendered labor divisions. As in Italy, where care has become central to feminist and commons-based mobilizations, in Spain it has not only been widely politicized but has also led to the creation of new terms that reimagine political relations.

Social movement studies have extensively examined the concept of “solidarity,” which shares certain affinities with the notion of “care.” But what exactly does solidarity entail, and how does it differ from care? The role and impact of solidarity in contentious collective action have been widely debated among scholars. Solidarity, derived from the Latin *solidus* (meaning whole or integrated), emphasizes unity and is often considered crucial for building collective identities, fostering group commitment, and enabling broader mobilization (Fireman & Gamson, 1979; Hund & Benford, 2004). Melucci described solidarity as “the ability of actors to recognize others, and to be recognized, as belonging to the same social unit” (1996, p. 23). Santos (2020) adopts a Durkheimian perspective, conceptualizing solidarity as the willingness of individuals to allocate their resources (such as time, money, and energy) toward the collective objectives of a group. In recent years, social movement scholars have particularly

associated “solidarity” with movements that create alternative healthcare infrastructures (Cabot, 2016), develop alternative economies (Esteves, 2024), or provide support to refugees and people on the move (Agustín & Jørgensen, 2019; Milan & Martini, 2024), highlighting the contentious nature of these mobilizations (Ambrosini, 2024).

Political philosophers have differentiated between “solidarity among,” a symmetrical relationship among members of the same social group, and “solidarity with,” where groups may differ and symmetry is not necessary, with charity being a prime example. Some argue that the latter does not constitute solidarity at all (Sangiovanni, 2024), echoing mutual aid advocate Dean Spade, who contrasts social movements’ solidarity with charity (2020b). Others take the opposite view, asserting that asymmetries are always present, particularly when more privileged social groups (e.g., European activists) act in solidarity with less privileged ones (e.g., people on the move). Regarding solidarity *among*, it is crucial to feel part of the same social group (hence the importance of collective identities), even if the group is very broad, as in the case of class solidarity. For scholars like Scholz (2008), solidarity is explicitly political and oppositional, with its roots in early nineteenth-century French socialism. Solidarity can also take civic, national, or Christian forms. However, in recent times, it has been central to social movements such as anticolonial, Black, feminist, LGBTQ, and disability rights struggles.

Despite its extensive theorization, one of the major issues with solidarity is its ambiguity. Like care, solidarity can be considered a “condensation symbol,” with its meanings expanding as the concept or practice evolves from its original form (Sapir, 1934). Solidarity and care share the idea of supporting others and pose similar philosophical dilemmas regarding symmetry and asymmetry (or hierarchy and non-hierarchy). However, care places less emphasis on unity and belonging to the same social group. Moreover, care encompasses distinct aspects not captured by solidarity, including (a) its gendered dimension, which critiques patriarchy, the gendered division of labor, and the masculine notion of individual autonomy, and (b) its extension to non-human actors, emphasizing the maintenance of the environment as a life-sustaining web.

The question of why “care” has emerged as a contentious term, used as frequently as (or even more than) “solidarity” to define the logic behind certain forms of collective action, such as, is closely tied to these theoretical differences. One might wonder, then, why this shift is happening now. I argue that this is because the core principle of care involves recognizing

vulnerabilities and mutual dependencies. As life appears increasingly under threat—whether human life due to gender violence and the pandemic, or both human and non-human life due to the socioecological and climate crisis—it becomes a political issue to acknowledge our collective vulnerabilities.<sup>12</sup>

The ways care has been understood in the social sciences are broadly two: as related to either value or values. In terms of value, scholars have stressed how care as an activity, particularly as work, produces value itself, and constitutes the basic condition upon which virtually all the rest of value is created. In terms of values, care has been seen as an ethical stance, a moral theory with specific conflictual or generative relationships with theories of justice and politics. Before delving into care, though, I should give a brief account of what I mean by value and values, as the framework now outlined will be the base for the rest of this thesis.

### **2.3 Value(s)**

Value and values have amply been investigated by various disciplines in the social sciences, but anthropological theory was particularly good at showing how and why the same word is used for something apparently so different, or even antithetical. Value in the economic sense is an almost objective and universal measure of the degree to which things are desired, and is closely related to the monetary price assigned to them; values are conceptions of what is good, proper, or desirable; that is, those ethical and moral commitments (such as friendship, family, honor, solidarity) which often, though not always, justify why we act in opposite ways than those that the logic of value would want us to. Despite these differences, both are strictly related to desire, though one could say that the former more quantitatively, the latter more qualitatively.

The social sciences have reflected on value and values for centuries. Yet the most holistic and synthetic attempt to keep these two registers in dialogue was elaborated by David Graeber in *Toward an Anthropological Theory of Value: The False Coin of Our Own Dreams* (2001). Often seen as his most substantial contribution to social theory, the book develops a framework that links action, meaning, and desire, while explicitly resisting both economic reductionism and the abstraction of linguistic structuralism. Graeber's theory aims "to bring together society

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<sup>12</sup> The empirical analysis of how activist collectives mobilize and contest the language of care will be developed in Chapter 4.

and human purposes, to move from meaning to desire” (Graeber 2001, 21), offering a way to bridge theories rooted in social structure and those grounded in individual motivation.

Graeber’s core definition of value is especially illuminating: “the way in which actions become meaningful to the actor by being incorporated in some larger, social totality—even if in many cases the totality in question exists primarily in the actor’s imagination” (Graeber 2001, xii). This definition moves beyond price and preference to consider how people situate their actions within broader constellations of meaning, aspiration, and social recognition. Building on thinkers such as Nancy Munn and Terence Turner, Graeber proposes that value emerges from human action—not just economic labor, but creative, relational activity through which people make the world and are made by it. This implies that value is not just produced but embodied and socially congealed: what makes something valuable is the accumulation of actions, intentions, and imaginaries that surround it.

Crucially, this anthropological theory of value allows us to understand value and values not as separate domains, but as intimately entangled. As DuBois and Salas (2021) put it, this approach “goes to the core of social relationships which keep people entangled in a given social formation.” It is this entanglement that Graeber’s reinterpreted labor theory of value seeks to capture, expanding the idea of labor to include all forms of world-making action: not only salaried work, but also care, creativity, and collective endeavor. As Sutton (2004) notes in his review, this enables a more capacious theory of value that moves beyond both utilitarianism and poststructuralist relativism, and places political action and meaning making at the center.

In their introduction to a recent special issue of *Economic Anthropology*, Souleles, Archer, and Thaning (2023) reaffirm this perspective, noting that value theory “offers a way to understand the pressing issues that motivate anthropological investigation” and should be seen as a “grounding theory for how human social life works.” Crucially, they insist that value and values are vernacular, not merely analytical, categories, but concepts that emerge through practice and deliberation. This emphasis on the *vernacular*, on what people themselves see as worthwhile or desirable, resonates deeply with Graeber’s effort to theorize how people pursue value by imagining and enacting social totalities. In doing so, value becomes not just a measure, but a political technology.

What does all this have to do with care? I argue that Graeber's theory is particularly important for this thesis for two reasons. First, by placing creative relational action at the center of value production, it opens a theoretical door to understand care as the fundamental value-making activity. In this sense, care is what makes value possible. It is the invisible labor, emotional effort, and infrastructural work that sustains life, institutions, and even economic systems. Secondly, looking at value and values separately, but intimately entangled in practice, proves particularly useful when thinking about care. Indeed, care can be easily thought of as concerning both value and values. Various authors have pointed out to the difficulty in defining and delimiting care, and in providing a clear genealogy of its literature in the social sciences, because care is many things at the same time, having intertwined ethical, practical, and affective aspects (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). Others have seen it as contemporarily an emotion/disposition, an activity/labor, and a relationship, its complexity being increased by the fact that, in reality, care is three (or more) things at once (Rummery & Fine, 2012). Using Graeber's framework, we can appreciate this multiplicity without collapsing it: care can be analytically held as both value and values, as labor that generates worth and as the ethical principle that motivates and guides it.

Of course, this dual framework is a simplification. As I will argue throughout the thesis, care is never only one or the other, and the boundary between the two is porous. When I assign particular authors or traditions to the "value" or "values" camp, I do so analytically: not to flatten their arguments, but to clarify how care is being framed in different contexts. What this framework enables, ultimately, is a way to hold together the economic, affective, and ethical dimensions of care without reducing one to the other. In this sense, I understand care as praxis, that is, the dynamic interplay between ideas (values) and action (value), or the process through which people critically reflect on the world and act to change it. In what follows, I first introduce the idea of care politics and then delve into how care has been theorized as value and as values. This theoretical elaboration will serve as the backbone for the rest of the dissertation.

## **2.4 Care Politics, An Introduction**

Care was a relatively underexplored phenomenon in the social sciences prior to the study of its theoretical and normative underpinnings, which was started by feminist scholars between the 70s and 80s of the last century (Rummery & Fine, 2012). The reason can be found in the shift, surely attributable to feminist movements and scholarship, to recognizing as a public and political concern what had been historically treated as a feminine and hence private matter.

Parallely, more structural determinants of the increasing attention to care by the social sciences can be identified in the neoliberal rearrangement of the global socioeconomic order that began in the same decade with the retrenchment of the welfare state and the globalization of value chains (including care ones), as well as by the dire effects of austerity policies following the great recession started with the 2008/09 financial crisis. Tronto effectively summarizes care's trajectory as follows: "caring responsibilities have been allocated through ideas such as domesticity in the nineteenth century, professionalization and institutionalization in the twentieth century, and marketization in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries" (Tronto, 2013, p. 49). If care should not just be a private familiar matter, institutions no longer engage in it either, and market mechanisms are ultimately delusional, then how, and through what mechanisms, are people supposed to care for each other? This thesis will look at actors actively grappling with this question.

All care is political, but some forms of care are politicized more explicitly. Likewise, everything written about care in the social sciences is ultimately political, though some literatures engage more directly with questions of power, justice, and collective action. If we take care seriously, it is hard to imagine any aspect of it—emotional, practical, ethical, relational, affective, medical, psychological—not being ultimately political. This perspective may be biased by my background in politics and sociology, but it also stems from taking feminism seriously when it asserts that "the personal is political." Care can be deeply personal, yet it is always political. That said, some aspects of care are more political than others. The literature on care is now so vast and multidisciplinary that boundaries must be drawn to stay focused. Therefore, care is particularly interesting to me when it is directly connected to issues of power, justice, citizenship, democracy, and collective action.

For example, in an important *Critical Exchange* published in *Contemporary Political Theory* titled *The Politics of Care*, a range of authors were prompted to answer the question: *What would be required for care to be an ethic and political practice that orients people to a new way of living, relating, and governing?* (Woodly et al., 2021). The responses were wide-ranging: Marin critiques the contradiction in governance that praises but devalues care, rooted in a gendered and racialized division of labor; Threadcraft focuses on mass incarceration and the punishment of abused women; Harris argues that effective care ethics must dismantle racial capitalism; Ticktin advocates for a *decolonial feminist commons*; and Syedullah explores *abolitionist care* in education. Despite their different foci, the editors converge on a shared

thesis: that care today must be understood not simply as a moral attitude, but as an *interdependent survival strategy, a basis for political organization, and a prefigurative horizon for social transformation* (Woodly et al., 2021, p. 891). This dissertation confirms and contributes to this emerging perspective.

Yet one cannot write about the politics of care without referring to Joan Tronto, the thinker who more than anyone was able to inscribe care into political theory. She argued that politics has been misunderstood as an extension of economics, a viewpoint that overlooks the essential role of care in political life. Politics, instead, should be seen more like the responsibilities within a household: a realm of caring (Tronto, 2013). With Berenice Fischer, she formulated the most widely cited definition of care as “a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web” (Tronto & Fisher, 1990). Some have considered the latter more a delimitation than a definition, others criticized it for being too broad (Held, 2006), yet such a broad definition undoubtedly has the merit to reveal the whole complexity of the concept. As noted by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) this definition keeps intimately together the material aspect of care as an activity (hence including care work), as well as the ethical and political aspects of it, expressed by the pursuit of a life to be lived “as well as possible.” It also points to how this activity is inherent to humankind (“a species activity”) which happens among humans but also with their environment, underlining human and non-human interdependency in the web of life, reflecting a key feminist and eco-feminist stance. As noted by de la Bellacasa, these dimensions are often in tension in practice, and this definition helps keeping this complexity and ambivalence visible. Finally, it keeps this ethics away from strict moral prescriptions, but really open-ended (“everything we do”) making “of ethics a hand-on, ongoing process of recreation of ‘as well as possible’ relations and therefore one that requires a speculative opening about what a possible involves” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, p. 6).

Now that a baseline definition of care has been proposed, I turn to the conception of politics that best supports the arguments developed in this thesis. Among the countless definitions, it makes sense to choose one that builds on the framework discussed so far, one that connects politics directly to values. Politics can indeed be understood as a struggle to both define and accumulate value, as well as between the imaginary arenas in which these values are realized

(Graeber, 2013a, p. 228). Straightforward examples of political struggles to accumulate value are class struggle in Marxist terms or Bourdieu's fields in which players compete to accumulate capital. Yet politics is not just about value in the singular, but also, and more importantly, about values: around which values we build and reproduce the society we want to live in and to struggle for? Freedom? Equality? The nation? The family? For example, in parts of ancient Greece, an important one was famously "honor," and peoples and communities struggled to accumulate that, rather than, say, exchange value. Value arenas are universes that "carry with them a philosophy of human existence, of what people are, what they want, about the nature of the world they inhabit" (Graeber, 2013a, p. 229). This is why we can talk, Graeber notices, of *homo economicus*, *homo faber*, or, following Tronto, we could be talking of *homo curans* (Tronto, 2017). In the following lines, then, I will briefly outline (in a far from exhaustive manner) how care has been understood as both value-creating activity (that is, as labor) and as value in the broader, ethical, sense.

## 2.5 Care As Value

What is probably among the first instances of the explicit politicization of care dates back to 1972 when, as part of second-wave feminism, a transnational campaign focused on the centrality of care labor was founded in Padua, Italy. There, autonomous Marxist feminists Maria Rosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Silvia Federici, and Brigitte Galtier launched the *International Wages for Housework Campaign* (Dalla Costa 2019), literally asking for housework to be waged. The campaign was meant to provocatively highlight that women's domestic and other wageless activities actually constituted unpaid "reproductive" labor, predominantly performed by women, essential for producing labor power and reproducing capitalism (Dalla Costa and James 1975). More theoretical depth to these groundbreaking arguments was added, for example, by Silvia Federici (2004), who argued that the invisibilisation, naturalization, and devaluation of reproductive labor historically made primitive accumulation possible, thus creating the conditions for capitalism. Campaigning to make this work recognized and retributed was therefore meant to hit capitalism at its core (patriarchal) mechanisms.

These fundamental activities, in a Marxist feminist framework, are framed as "social reproduction," of which a widely cited definition is "the activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, and responsibilities and relationships directly involved in maintaining life, on a daily

basis and intergenerationally” (Laslett & Brenner, 1989, p. 382).<sup>13</sup> The reader can notice some similarities to Tronto’s definition of care, cited a few pages above. Indeed, a debate exists about whether “care” or “social reproduction” is a more appropriate framing for the issue at stake. Social reproduction theorists consider “social reproduction” as “broader” than care (Mezzadri, 2019), but this is often because they mainly consider care as a rather specific kind of work. Care theorists consider the opposite. Personally, I believe the debate is of limited interest, as the choice ultimately accounts for a matter of preference. Yet, in this dissertation I choose “care” over “social reproduction” for at least three reasons: first, as I anticipated, because it does not tight the discussion to a specific (Marxist) intellectual tradition, however valuable<sup>14</sup>; second, because I believe that the whole literature on care ethics (the next subsection) is of fundamental importance; third, because care, unlike social reproduction, is a word used beyond academia and understandable by most.

Now, a debate is still ongoing within Marxist scholarship about whether these activities can themselves be considered value-producing in Marxian terms. Early social reproduction scholars tended to argue that domestic and wageless labor was value-producing in themselves, while others Marxists argue it is mainly important insofar as it produces the commodity of “labor power” (Bhattacharya, 2017; Mezzadri, 2019). However, the point here is not to explore the quandaries of the Marxian labor theory of value<sup>15</sup>; what matters is that, since the 1970s, care started to be seen as a fundamental activity in society, and particularly a form of work, directly or indirectly necessary for processes of value-creation.

Subsequent works underscored the strenuous and demanding nature of care work, particularly as it falls disproportionately upon the shoulders of women without due recognition or compensation. Black feminists emphasized how care work imposes a significant and often inescapable burden on individuals who face multiple forms of discrimination, encompassing not only gender but also considerations of race, citizenship status, and class, as it was early noted by Angela Davis (1981). Consequently, care itself emerges as a site of the intersection of multiple scales, inequalities, and crises (Tyler, 2015).

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<sup>13</sup> As testified by this definition, marxist feminists have re-signified Marx’s original locution, who rather used the term to refer to *societal* reproduction.

<sup>14</sup> To be precise, before Marxist, “social reproduction” was a category of classic economy, dating back to Quesnay’s *Tableau économique* of 1758.

<sup>15</sup> See for example (Bubeck, 1995; Mezzadri, 2020)

While mostly disconnected from Marxist frameworks of social reproduction, a vast literature on care as both paid and unpaid work has flourished in the last few decades in the social sciences, particularly sociology, social policy, and political economy. Aulenbacher et al. (2018) argue that three tendencies can be identified in sociology, shedding light on the social organization of care and care work: the marketization and the de-commodification of care and care work; the transnationalization of labor and policies; and new forms of governance and social statehood. As anticipated at the beginning of section 1.2, socioeconomic transformations can explain this increasing interest. First, the retrenchment of Global North welfare states explains the increasing interest in care within social policy (Daly, 2021; F. Williams, 2018), which sees care as “the labor, resources and relations involved in the provision of care and assistance for those requiring it” (Daly, 2021, p. 108) in a context that prominent authors agree to define as a “care crisis” (Dowling, 2021; Fraser, 2016a). The latter refers to the many ways in which the social capacities for caring are being increasingly squeezed under capitalism, despite the latter being dependent on them (Fraser, 2016b). Second, care is also affected by globalization: in a much related literature, care is seen in light of critical understandings of (neo-)colonialism; that is, global care chains in which families in the Global North outsource their care needs to women in the Global South, letting the latter’s families without care or making them outsource it in turn, thus intersecting with deep issues of global inequalities and migrations through gendered and racial lines (Lutz, 2018; Yeates, 2012).

A further fundamental stream of analysis of care as value concerns the importance that care has in relation to the environment. The latter was developed by the work of ecofeminists such as Mies, Shiva and Salleh (1993), who emphasized how the sustainment of life does not only depend on care between humans, but as well on the care of the earth and its ecosystems, water, seeds and crops, also tasks that are historically and transculturally predominantly performed by women. Putting care work in relation to nature is a reminder of how care as an activity, or labor, is not only towards other humans but towards other parts of our environment, as Tronto and Fisher wrote in their definition.

Ecofeminist political ecologists, and particularly materialist ecofeminists, wrote more in-depth about it. Indeed, ecofeminists link the exploitation of *nature* as well of what tends to be *naturalized*, like women’s care work (Mellor, 1997; Plumwood, 1993). Vandana Shiva (1989) made visible the role of peasant reproductive labor in the maintenance of natural environments, and ecological feminists have continued to draw parallels between housework in industrialized

societies and subsistence activities in postcolonial contexts (Bennholdt-Thomsen et al., 2001; Mies, 1986). Salleh called all those subjects who reproduce humanity by taking care of the life-sustaining biophysical environment the “global meta-industrial class”, made of unpaid caregivers, peasants, and indigenous gatherers (Salleh, 2010). Stefania Barca, who underlies how these subjects are racialized, feminized, dispossessed, calls them “forces of reproduction” (Barca, 2020).

Materialist ecofeminist literature added ecology to the equation of sex, race and class, by linking “the politico/economic devaluation of reproduction with the degradation of the environment, thus producing a radically new narrative of capitalist/industrial modernity” (Barca, 2020, p. 28). The work of ecofeminists like Mies (1986) and Waring (1988) laid the basis for a decolonial and feminist ecosocialism rejecting GDP as a measure of progress (Gregoratti & Raphael, 2019). Also, the centrality of an ecofeminist understanding of care increasingly became associated to, and central for, calls for degrowth (D’Alisa et al., 2015; Dengler & Lang, 2021; Dengler & Strunk, 2017). The latter’s proponents, for example, have called for a “care-full” degrowth transformation for a post-Covid society (Paulson et al., 2020). In fact, valuing care work and centering the economy around it would imply a reduction of productive and ecologically damaging activities in favor of reproductive and ecological actions of maintenance, repair, and healing. Indeed, the centrality of caring activities for any economy has been underlined for long by ecological economics (Jochimsen & Knobloch, 1997).

Somewhat parallelly, Spanish-speaking literature in both Latin America and Spain established care as a fundamental issue within the framework of *sostenibilidad de la vida* (life sustenance) (Carrasco, 2001). This tradition particularly highlights the sustainability, and centrality, of life itself. Prominent feminists like Veronica Gago and Yayo Herrero have also used the same framework to discuss the political importance of care for ecofeminism (Gago & Herrero, 2023). This framework revolves around two dimensions: the *ecodependency* and interdependency of human beings. Ecodependency arises from our connection to nature, recognizing the planet’s biophysical limits and the impossibility of sustaining an ever-expanding economic metabolism reliant on increasing energy and materials. Interdependency emphasizes our reliance on others’ care, especially during certain life stages. The ongoing socioecological crisis is attributed to an economic and cultural arrangement, namely growthism, that systematically overlooks both limits and vulnerabilities (Herrero, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2023; Perez Orozco, 2006, 2014).

A central issue is defining the boundaries of care as an activity: should it be strictly interpreted as care work in the sociological sense, occurring in settings such as homes (for children or elders) and institutions like nursing homes, childcare centers, and schools (Stacey, 2013, p. 67)? Or should it be understood in the broader eco-feminist sense of life-sustaining activities? This distinction is crucial because any meaningful value-generating activity could be considered a form of care, addressing the various needs of others, whether physical, emotional, or otherwise.

Economic anthropology often argues that throughout history, human societies have been more focused on the production of people (or the mutual shaping of specific kinds of people) than on the production of wealth and material goods, let alone their consumption (Graeber, 2006). Major ethical debates in many societies have revolved around what kind of individuals these societies aimed to nurture. In these contexts, “the production of material necessities is valuable precisely as it extends the principle of care for others and the mutual creation of human beings” (Graeber, 2021, p. 322).

Thus, any economic action can be interpreted as a form of caring labor, which is work that helps meet others’ needs (Folbre, 2009). As Ina Praetorius provocatively suggests, in this sense, “the economy is care” (2015). We build houses because we care about providing shelter, and we produce cars because we care about enabling mobility. Marx famously highlighted the issue of commodity fetishism, where relationships between people are disguised as relationships between commodities. Without alienation, work, including production and manufacturing, would be motivated by the anticipation of others’ needs and desires, reflecting a caring attitude. This view does not eliminate the specificities of what is currently classified as care work (refer to section 2) nor claim that every job in today’s economic system is caring. Rather, it suggests that all meaningful, non-alienated work can be seen as a form of care, even if mediated by material objects.

In a lecture at the Collège de France, Graeber proposed that such an economy would replace the productivist view of the economy—as production (creation from nothing) and consumption (destruction)—with one where all value-generating labor is seen in terms of care and freedom (and freedom as play). “Caring labor is best conceived as labor ultimately directed at maintaining or enhancing another’s freedom” (Graeber, 2018b). The quintessential example of caring labor, maternal care, illustrates this: a mother takes care of her children so they can play

(and to play with them), with play being “the development of human energy as an end in itself, the true realm of freedom” (Marx, 1993, p. 959).

## 2.6 Care As Values

Having reviewed the literature focusing on care as a value-creating activity, that is, as labor, now I will delve into care understood in a broader, ethical, sense. That is the realm of values. The fundamental contribution to this broader understanding of care comes from The Ethics of Care, a critical framework that emerged within feminist thought as a response to traditional moral theories. So, “rather than being a set of principles from which one deduces proper action, a feminist democratic ethic of care begins by envisioning series of caring practices, nested within one another” (Tronto, 2013, p. 30). Indeed, care theorists developed a philosophical contrast between an “ethic of rights” and an “ethic of care” (Gilligan, 1982). Yet Tronto suggests that a care ethic should also be contrasted with a work ethic (Tronto, 2013). Among the reasons for this is that this literature stresses the peculiarity of care as an activity for which the category of work would be reductive. Yet, care is both a moral disposition *and* an activity. Hence, despite looking at it from a values perspective here for analytical purposes, the reality is that, as I initially argued, value and values are constantly and inherently entangled.

Developed initially by Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984), the moral theory of care emphasizes the significance of caring, dependencies, and vulnerabilities in shaping moral decisions within interdependent relationships. Gilligan’s influential work, *In a Different Voice* (1982), was particularly groundbreaking, highlighting the emergence of a caring ethical perspective, especially within the mother-child dynamic. The Ethics of Care was conceived as a critique of the justice perspective central to Kantian and utilitarian ethics. The critique was that these frameworks, which emphasize autonomy and justice, often fail to account for the relational and interdependent aspects of human life. The Ethics of Care instead underscored the importance of empathy, compassion, and the moral significance of caring for others, particularly in contexts of dependency and vulnerability.

Building on this foundation, scholars have significantly expanded the scope of the Ethics of Care beyond its initial focus in social psychology, exploring the moral and political implications of caring. Diemut Bubeck (1995) linked care ethics with labor, critiquing the exploitation inherent in care work, which is predominantly assigned to women, and highlighting the need to reconsider the ethical dimensions of care within the context of labor

and gender. Virginia Held (2006) explored the political, social, and global implications of care, arguing for its central role in these broader contexts. In her book *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (2006), Held argues that “the focus of the ethics of care is on the compelling moral salience of attending to and meeting the needs of the particular others for whom we take responsibility” (2006, p. 10). According to Held, care involves both emotion and reason, focuses on particular individuals, and is rooted in a relational understanding of human beings. However, Tronto criticizes Held for neglecting aspects such as self-care or public forms of care (2013). Indeed, critical feminist scholars have emphasized the need to expand care ethics beyond its early conceptualizations within social science and health research, where it was often treated as an informal, essentialized, gender-based activity (Sevenhuijsen, 2000, p. 29; Tronto, 1993, p. 114). Instead, more recent approaches conceptualize care as a relational and ongoing process, attentive to the diverse practices involved in maintaining and repairing the world (Tronto, 1993; M. J. Williams, 2017).

Indeed, Joan Tronto (1993, 2013) further advanced the discourse by integrating care ethics with feminist theory and political science. Care is shown as a fundamentally relational concept, manifesting as both an action and a disposition that involves reaching out to others. This relational aspect of care extends far beyond the personal sphere, influencing societal structures, politics, and economics in profound ways. Tronto describes care as an act of “disposition” from the self, a movement of “reaching out to something other than the self” (1993, p. 102), while challenging views of care as merely an innate, self-rewarding act especially for women, and hence naturally feminine. An essentialist understanding of care not only simplifies the complexities of care but also obscures the inequalities that underlie it. Instead, she recognized that caring activities are often relegated to intersectionally marginalized groups, not only by gender but also by race, class, and other social divisions that create hierarchies of importance among citizens. In contrast, a truly democratic society must address these intersections to ensure that care responsibilities are distributed equitably and justly. Tronto’s work emphasized the need to view caregiving not just as an individual responsibility but as a societal obligation crucial to addressing power dynamics and social inequalities. Importantly, Tronto and Fisher provided the first ground-breaking definition of care (1990), on which I reflected in section 1.4.

The Ethics of Care also presents a fundamental challenge to the dominant model of the self-interested, autonomous individual—often characterized as the “homo economicus”—that

underpins much of classical and modern economic and social thought. Skeggs criticizes the performative aspect of these social theories, which often internalize instrumentalism and greed, ultimately legitimizing the very structures they intend to critique (2014).

In Skeggs' own words, the ethics of care challenges...

...theories from classical to modern [that] assume a structure of feeling — usually disenchantment and/or instrumentalism and greed — which are somehow internalised into dispositions that shape the subject, such as the rational, reflexive, acquisitive, knowing, omnivorous subject, etc. [...] so much so that what at first appears to be critique often ends as legitimation. (Skeggs, 2014, p. 3)

Following her point, the Ethics of Care, by building on the very fact that the human experience is marked by vulnerability and interdependency, if not constantly, at different stages of life, legitimizes structures of feeling that imply alternative social theories to the currently hegemonic ones. If one starts from the premise that we are all vulnerable, then care is the obvious necessary practice as well as the ethical principle on which to restructure society as a whole, by making it visible, centering it, redistributing, and democratizing it (Tronto, 2013). A society and economy built on such basic, yet profoundly different, (prevalent) understanding of human beings—the substitution of the *homo economicus* with the caring person—, would work in a substantially different way, likely involving a shift away from hypercompetitive logics towards more solidaristic and cooperative ones. Yet, despite its promise as an alternative organizing principle for society, care itself is not free from contradictions, power dynamics, and structural inequalities.

Yet, care is neither innocent nor unequivocally virtuous; it is a terrain saturated with conflict, power, and ambivalence. Some perspectives risk reducing care to a dyadic relationship between a more powerful caregiver and a weaker care receiver (Noddings, 1984), obscuring the structural inequalities that care can perpetuate. It is crucial to resist defining all care as inherently good: historically, discourses of care have often masked exploitation and domination. As Uma Narayan (1995) points out, colonialism did not present itself to the imperialist population as a system of exploitation, but rather cloaked its violence within a narrative of benevolent care, thereby legitimizing injustice. Similarly, Fragnito and Tola (2021) emphasize that even when animated by the intention to sustain life, care practices are entangled in social hierarchies that distribute vulnerability, responsibility, and privilege unequally along

lines of gender, race, and class. Moreover, under contemporary capitalism care itself becomes a terrain of intensified contradictions, where attempts to "fix" care crises often reinforce exploitation through commodification, precarization, and outsourcing (Dowling, 2018). The very language of care, they argue, is double-edged: it can serve emancipatory projects, but also legitimize exclusion and conceal violence. Drawing on Pascale Molinier, they insist that care must be recognized as a *zone névralgique de conflit* ("a neuralgic zone of conflict") where solidarity and domination, recognition and invisibilization, generosity and exhaustion, constantly coexist (Molinier, cited in Fragnito & Tola, 2021, p. 9). To grapple with care politically, it is essential not to sanitize or idealize it, but to hold open its tensions, acknowledging that care always traverses contested and unequal social terrains.

Having outlined both the transformative potential and the political ambiguities of care, I now turn to Joan Tronto's political theory of care, which offers a systematic framework to understand care as an iterative and collective process. As anticipated, Joan Tronto is probably the political thinker who brought care ethics closer to political theory, and in particular to democratic theory. To bring attention to these aspects of care it is useful to recall Tronto's much-cited four-step process of care as a moral and political practice (1993).

*Caring about* means recognizing the need for care. This step involves becoming aware of a need or problem and acknowledging that care is required. It requires attentiveness to the needs of others. *Caring for* implies assuming responsibility for the identified need and planning how to provide care. *Care-Giving* is the direct action of providing care. This is the phase where the actual work of care takes place. It involves the physical or emotional labor required to address the need. *Care-Receiving* is the response of the person or entity (thing, group, animal, plant, or environment) receiving care. In this step, the caregiver observes and listens to the response of the care recipient to ensure that the care provided is sufficient, or successful, complete, and appropriate. These steps emphasize the complexity and moral dimensions of care, moving beyond simply performing tasks to considering the broader implications and responsibilities involved in care relationships. I will return to them later, when discussing Santos' discussion of the significance of these steps for collective action (Santos, 2020).

Here, however, I focus on Tronto's fifth dimension, introduced in her work on care and democracy (2013): *Caring With*. This phase integrates the care process into a broader social and ethical context, ensuring that care aligns with democratic commitments to justice, equality,

and freedom for all, while respecting both the caregiver and the care recipient. Tronto defines this practice as caring for citizens and for democracy itself, which she considers fundamental characteristics of democratic citizenship (Tronto, 2013). In line with Tronto's perspective, Eva Kittay (1999) argues for the inclusion of care for caregivers as a foundational principle in a liberal democratic order. This democratic approach to care goes beyond merely assigning responsibilities; it requires an ongoing process where citizens continually renegotiate these duties, thereby reinforcing the democratic nature of society.

Other feminist scholars have similarly emphasized the deep interconnection between care and democracy. For Sevenhuijsen (2000, p. 29), a democratic ethics of care demands that everyone should have "an equal share in the processes of caregiving and receiving." Drawing on this principle, she suggests that care can serve as a means to forge new relationships of interdependence between the individual and the community, fostering new forms of social solidarity and contributing to the repair of a fragmented world. In this view, democratizing care is not merely about ensuring fairness in the distribution of responsibilities, but about reshaping the very fabric of civic life around principles of mutual recognition, responsibility, and relationality.

Tronto contends that democratic theory falls short if it neglects the question of "who cares," leading to a distorted view of citizens that overemphasizes their roles as workers while undervaluing their participation in caring relationships. She concludes by connecting care to freedom, emphasizing, as Graeber did, that the ultimate goal of good and democratic care is to make people as free as possible:

To envision a society as caring is to envision a society engaged in the daily and extraordinary activities of meeting peoples' needs. To envision a society as democratic and caring is to envision a society whose account of justice balances how the burdens and joys of caring are equalized so as to leave every citizen with as much freedom as possible.

(Tronto 2013, p. 46)

So far, I have established the many ways in which care is deeply political. In particular, I have defined politics as a struggle to accumulate value and, more importantly, to define what value is. Hence, I have explored care both in its dimension of activity that is contemporarily devalued yet ultimately indispensable for accumulation, and care in its broader ethical sense, as a value

in the plural, useful for rethinking society, politics, and democracy away from economic versions and toward meeting needs and making people free. This critical reimagining resonates with recent contributions, such as Dowling's (2018) call for grounding care infrastructures in collective, democratic practices (what she terms care municipalism) thus reclaiming care from commodification and embedding it within participatory commons frameworks. But before turning to the transdisciplinary literature on the commons, a last fundamental element of care politics deserves attention: class.

## **2.7 Class: A Matter Of Value And Care**

Having theorized care as both value and values, and outlined how care generates, expresses, and contests moral and political value, I now turn to a key structuring force that shapes how care is enacted and recognized in commons: class. While the latter is often addressed in terms of structural position or socioeconomic background, I adopt a more relational and performative approach. I build on Bourdieu's theory of practice, Graeber's theory of value, and Skeggs' seminal work on class and gender, to give a working definition class apt for the purposes of this thesis (particularly chapters 6 and 7).

Class denotes one's position in a structure of social relations, which gives one access to certain resources and dispositions, crystallized in what Bourdieu calls *habitus*, the durable schemes of perception, appreciation, and action that translate one's capital configuration into seemingly natural ways of being (1987). But simultaneously, class involves a hierarchy of values: dominant groups have the power to define what is "valuable" (socially respected, rewarded), be it certain lifestyles, credentials, or forms of work, whereas subordinate groups often see their contributions (like caring labor or community work) undervalued or stigmatized (Skeggs, 1997, 2011). In practice, this means class shapes both material life and moral life: it influences not only how people earn and live, but also how they find meaning and how they are esteemed by others. A value-centered, practice-informed notion of class recognizes that practices of care and other value-driven actions are central to social life, yet the ability to partake in or be credited for such practices is stratified by class (Graeber, 2001). So, I define class as a relational social position constituted by unequal configurations of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital and shaped by the distinctive values and practices its members enact and that others attribute to them. It organizes a hierarchy of resources and recognition in which power is exercised not only through material wealth, but also through the capacity to decide whose actions and ways of life count as valuable.

In an attempt to bridge Bourdieu's and Graeber's insights on class, value, and care with the help of feminist scholars like Skeggs, in a parallel work to this thesis, during the PhD years, Luca Cigna and I developed Graeber's idea of the "caring classes". (2024) Using survey data, we found that valuing care for others is prevalent among certain working-class and service-oriented occupational groups, correlating with experiences of marginalization (e.g. gendered or racialized roles) and left-wing political orientations. This empirical finding supports the idea that care values themselves can become a basis for solidarity and political identity. Bridging Bourdieu and Graeber, the "caring classes" can be understood as a relational category (defined by positions in socio-economic structure) as well as a value community (defined by shared commitments and practices of care).

### **3. Commons Movements, Commoning, And Care**

It would be impossible to provide a complete account of the rich literature on the commons and their corollary concepts (common good, common, open-access resources etc.), and of the whole complexity of this expanding field of study.<sup>16</sup> Instead, I first give a concise introduction to what commons are, with a focus on urban commons, which will be useful to understand the two case studies of this thesis (this section). Then, I look at the interconnections between commons and social movements and define commons movements (section 3.1). Finally, I move to the critical literature that proposed the concept of commoning, a process that is closely related to political caring practices (section 3.2).

The concept of the commons, historically understood as shared land in feudal Europe (Linebaugh, 2008), gained significant modern attention with Garrett Hardin's article "The Tragedy of the Commons" (1968). Hardin, currently recognized by his own department at UC Santa Barbara as a scholar who had white nationalist, nativist, ableist, and eugenicist views (Chávez-García, 2023; UCSB Environmental Studies Program, n.d.), argued that unregulated access to shared resources inevitably leads to their depletion, necessitating state control or privatization to avoid environmental destruction. His perspective emphasized the dangers of overpopulation and environmental degradation, framing commons as vulnerable to misuse. However, later scholars such as Nobel Laureate economist Elinor Ostrom challenged Hardin's

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<sup>16</sup> For an introduction to the commons from the perspective of environmental sociology see Pellizzoni (2018), for an account of the framing of the commons as elaborated by social movements see Della Porta (2023a).

view, demonstrating that commons can be sustainably managed through community-driven governance (1990). Ostrom's work showed that individuals are not necessarily trapped in self-interest but can organize collectively to overcome the problem of free riding: the tendency to benefit from shared resources without contributing to their maintenance. Central to her analysis was the role of trust, reciprocity, and reputation, which enable cooperation to persist even in the absence of external enforcement. She also identified a set of design principles that characterize successful commons, including clearly defined boundaries, collective decision-making, local monitoring, graduated sanctions, and accessible conflict-resolution mechanisms that allow disagreements to be managed internally. In this view, boundary work—the ongoing definition and maintenance of who and what belongs to the commons—underpins monitoring, accountability, and the growth of trust. These issues of free riding, trust, and conflict resolution are not only central to Ostrom's framework but also reappear ethnographically in Chapter 6, where they are reconsidered in the context of everyday negotiations of care, responsibility, and participation within contemporary commons. In this light, Ostrom reframed the commons not as doomed to tragedy but as a dynamic social institution capable of fostering cooperation, learning, and adaptive governance.

Recent critiques of Elinor Ostrom's approach to the commons argue that while her work is valuable, it may be too accommodating of a global order characterized by neoliberalism and post-Fordist capitalism, which increasingly commodifies and encloses natural resources (Caffentzis, 2012). These critiques suggest that Ostrom's framework, which does not inherently oppose state or market regulation, might inadvertently support the very systems that contribute to social inequality and environmental degradation. In contrast, the discourse on the "common good" and the "common" (singular) has gained prominence, emphasizing the ethical and political dimensions of collective reproduction and sharing of the social-ecological wealth and web of life over material concerns (Dardot & Laval, 2019). This shift reflects a growing focus on "commoning": the social processes by which communities create and manage shared resources (De Angelis, 2017b; Fournier, 2013; Linebaugh, 2008).<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, boundary work is not merely technical but also political and ethical, since lines of inclusion/exclusion are continually negotiated with states, markets, and neighboring communities.

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<sup>17</sup> More on commoning in section 3.2 of this chapter

Importantly, building on rather than rejecting Ostrom, David Bollier (with Silke Helfrich) reframes her design principles through the lens of commoning. Conflict-resolution mechanisms become practices of relational care and repair that sustain the social fabric, not merely administrative procedures; trust is treated as emergent from shared doing, ritual, and reciprocity, rather than a precondition; and freeriding appears as an ongoing moral tension about contribution and entitlement that communities negotiate through peer governance, mutual accountability, and meaning-making, often favoring restorative and graduated responses over punitive enforcement. In this reworking, boundary work itself is understood as a participatory practice, iteratively articulated through charters, narratives, and everyday rituals, that keeps boundaries permeable yet accountable. This synthesis retains Ostrom's institutional strengths while foregrounding the affective and ethical labor that makes commons resilient (Bollier & Helfrich, 2019).

In recent years, increasingly politically engaged views of contemporary commons have emerged, showing their fundamental material role for “radical abundance” in contrast to the artificial scarcity created by past and present enclosures (Hickel, 2019). These spaces challenge capitalist structures while offering alternatives based on voluntary cooperation and horizontality, effectively blending “resistance, creation, and solidarity across multiple times and places” (Pickerill & Chatterton, 2006, p. 731). García López et al. (2017, p. 103) describe commons as sites of ongoing counter-hegemonic struggle, where the dynamic with hegemonic power involves “a constant process of struggle around a certain articulation of common(s) senses.” This literature highlights the importance of distinguishing between commons that create alternatives to capitalism and those that reproduce neoliberal capitalist values with “production in common within the system”, as De Angelis (2010, p. 967) puts it.

The frame of the commons has exploded in use in Europe as a consequence of anti-austerity protests, particularly in Southern Europe (Asara, 2020; della Porta, 2023a; Varvarousis et al., 2021). On the one hand, the movement of the squares, that involved long-term occupations of public spaces such as Occupy Wall Street in New York City, the 15M in Barcelona, and Syntagma square in Athens, was in itself a form of “liminal commons” (Varvarousis, 2022) and commoning which created “a new cultural language and a political community of solidarity” (Susser, 2017, p. 6). On the other hand, social movements in Southern Europe, most

prominently affected by austerity policies imposed by the so-called Troika,<sup>18</sup> were particularly prone to experiment with grassroots socio-economic concepts and practices, such as the commons (della Porta, 2023a; Narotzky, 2020). Among other things, they engaged in new forms of commoning aimed at building care infrastructures (Gutierrez Sanchez, 2023; Varvarousis & Kallis, 2016).

These practices have been particularly prominent in cities, where political squatting has been instrumental in reclaiming urban spaces for non-commodified social interactions and against speculative purposes, a process rooted in and dependent on practices of commoning (Di Felicianantonio, 2017; García-Lamarca, 2015). Abandoned buildings have been transformed by activists into vital spaces for social resilience, organizing projects like time banks, self-managed clinics, food networks, social canteens, etc. (Arampatzi, 2017; D’Alisa et al., 2015; Moreira & Morell, 2020). In cities like Naples and Barcelona, social centers, reclaimed spaces, cooperatives, and a diverse array of organizations engage with each other, forming those interconnected systems that De Angelis theorizes as “commons ecologies” (2017b; Ruiz Cayuela & García-Lamarca, 2023).

These processes manifested most prominently at the urban scale, where self-managed spaces started to be labeled as urban commons. Some scholars, however, are critical of considering “urban” as a mere indication of the city as a site for the commons. Huron, for example, defines urban commons as: “a specific way of experiencing collective work, among strangers, to govern non-commodified resources in spaces saturated with people, conflicting uses, and capitalist investment” (2015, p. 977). The dimension of urban saturation, particularly in relationship with phenomena like touristification and gentrification, and the heterogeneity of the strangers who engage in commoning in the city, are fundamental elements in the cases I analyze in this dissertation and will be recalled throughout the next chapters. Another element of fundamental importance for this thesis is the porosity of urban commons and, more specifically, the tension between openness and closeness that fundamentally characterize them (Huron, 2017, p. 1065).

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<sup>18</sup> Troika is a term used to refer to the single decision group created by three entities, the European Commission (EC), the European Central Bank (ECB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Caciagli and Milan (2021) introduce a dynamic perspective that challenges static conceptualizations of these spaces, thus enriching the understanding of urban commons as fluid and context-dependent phenomena. They emphasize the importance of analyzing them through specific analytical dimensions, such as their relationship with local institutions and their interaction with the surrounding environment. As a result, the dynamic framework they propose identifies different configurations and functions of urban commons, namely resilience, incorporation, and resistance; both cases of this thesis can be captured by the third, that is “contentious and transformative spaces that combine social reproduction with anti-capitalistic politics” (Caciagli & Milan, 2021, p. 396).

Some elements of the urban commons, moreover, are particularly interesting if contrasted to Ostrom’s theory. For example, according to Ostrom commons are more successful if their members share a past and a future (1990, p. 88), something less likely for an urban commons than for a rural one. Another important aspect in which urban commons depart from Ostrom is that, urban commons are not subtractable resources, because their value is not diminished by their consumption, but rather increased by activists who participate in them (Huron, 2017, p. 1064). What is generally given for granted is that contemporary urban commons are usually reclaimed and maintained by social movements. Hence, in the next subsection, I focus on the relationship between social movements and commons and, parallelly, between Social Movement Studies and Critical Commons Studies.

### **3.1 Towards Urban Commons Movements**

The importance of social movements in reclaiming and maintaining contemporary commons has been recognized during the last decade and is by now well known (De Angelis, 2012; Federici, 2011; Mattei, 2013). Concerning Southern Europe, and Italy specifically, legal scholars argued that the Italian movement for the commons exemplified how social movements were emerging as new forms of constituent power, challenging neoliberal economic constitutionalism by protecting public resources and pushing back against state and multinational enclosures, thereby revitalizing the concept of popular sovereignty through bottom-up constitutionalism (Bailey & Mattei, 2013; Mattei, 2013). This was particularly the case in Italy, with the movement against the privatization of water and the popular referendum of 2011 (della Porta et al., 2017; Mattei, 2013).

More recently, as I mentioned already, it has been highlighted that the movement of the squares of the 2010s gave impulse to the commons as a main “social outcome” (Varvarousis et al., 2021); that social movements and commons can have a co-productive relationship and produce a rhizomatic expansion of commoning (Varvarousis, 2020); or that the commons emerged in crisis-ridden Southern Europe as a fundamental frame for activists engaging with the economy (della Porta, 2023a). Yet the specific interaction between social movement studies and the study of the commons remains somewhat limited. Villamayor-Tomas and García-López, in a significant attempt to fill this gap, elaborated the concept of “commons movements” defining them as “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” (2021), a definition I adopt and extend in this thesis, by naming *urban commons movements* those commons movements operating at the urban scale. Other comprehensive attempts to bridge Critical Commons Studies and Social Movement Studies are contained in a special issue of Ecological Economics dedicated to commons movements (Villamayor-Tomas et al., 2022), as well as in an illuminating paper by Roussos and Malamidis (2021).

Their article asserts that the emergence of new forms of collective action, focused on self-organizing everyday life, offering informal welfare services, and creating innovative forms of social production and reproduction, particularly in Southern Europe during the global financial crisis, cannot be sufficiently explained by either of the two existing bodies of literature on their own (Roussos & Malamidis, 2021, p. 359). Interestingly, they clarify both the conceptual and theoretical aspects concerning important analytical categories used by the two bodies of literature: (1) social movements and social movement organizations (SMOs) versus commons, (2) activists versus commoners, and (3) mobilization versus commoning. For what concerns the first pair of categories, they argue that on the one hand approaching solidarity structures as sites of commoning can enhance social movement studies by revealing how these spaces evolve from contentious origins into systems where individuals collectively shape daily life and create new forms of commonwealth based on shared needs, equality, trust, care, and mutual aid. On the other hand incorporating the structural aspects of SMOs into commons literature provides a clearer framework, offering deeper insights into the democratic and strategic qualities of commons through their organizational structures, decision-making processes, and resource management, while also accounting for the varied sociopolitical contexts that influence their development and evolution (Roussos & Malamidis, 2021, p. 371).

Concerning the second set of categories, the authors argue that “commoner” enhances the concept of “activist” by emphasizing participation in decision-making and the management of daily life in commoning and solidarity projects, with an emphasis on care, trust, mutuality, and equity. They argue that this gives rise “to an incipient culture that redefines the ground-rules of the social—how society should be, and how people should relate to one another” (Roussos & Malamidis, 2021, p. 372). This closely recalls my previous discussion of politics as fundamentally engaged in defining values, and radical care politics as a politics engaged in valuing care. Parallely, they argue that the term “commoner” alone often fails to capture the political aspects of these activities, better captured by “activist”. Social movement studies hence help understand the contentious origins of commoners in the crisis-affected Southern European context and better understand their political trajectories, various forms of participation, and the continuity of their actions, ultimately re-politicizing their identity formation.

Concerning mobilization and commoning, Roussos and Malamidis argue that the literature on commons, by focusing on alternative social practices as immediate forms of change, complements the claim-based approach of social movement studies. However, it’s crucial not to assume that these practices will inherently lead to postcapitalist or “progressive” transformations. Social movement studies emphasize the need to consider the broader political landscape and shifts in subjectivities, enabling a more precise understanding of collective action in relation to existing social orders. The intersection between commoning and the formation of antagonistic institutions reveals a political praxis that intertwines the material aspects of life (such as work, housing, and healthcare) with the redefinition of social structures, resulting in both personal and collective transformation. I have cited extensively this article because it is crucial for this thesis, in which I refer to urban commons movements, I actively work with both literatures, and the terms “activists” and “commoners” are used interchangeably.

### **3.2 Commoning And Care**

In this subsection I explore the interaction between the literature on the commons (particularly on the process of commoning) has stressed the importance of care and has interacted with care literature, especially in terms of social reproduction. The significance of commons in social reproduction has been emphasized particularly by feminist and autonomous Marxist scholars

(De Angelis, 2017b; Federici, 2011, 2018; Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999). Silvia Federici, for example, is critical of Hardt and Negri's theory of the common because it overly emphasizes knowledge and information and does not engage enough with the material ways in which commons are fundamental for the reproduction of everyday life (2010, p. 287). Instead, she argues for commoning as a means of restoring autonomy over social reproduction (Federici, 2018). The process of commoning is indeed particularly central in feminist analyses, underlining, among other things, how such a process of caring for the commonwealth is, historically and presently, a practice predominately undertaken by women (Federici, 2018). Interpersonal care can be seen as part of the practice of commoning, which includes taking care of the commonwealth that is part of commons systems, and where shared resources and social relations are continuously reproduced and sustained (De Angelis, 2017b). Increasingly, commoning labors have been defined as practices of care (García-López et al., 2021). Social reproduction commoning (Barbagallo et al., 2019) has also been used to specifically refer to commoning addressing basic needs like shelter, food, water, and care.

The focus on care and commoning gained renewed interest in parallel to the ongoing feminist analyses about capitalism's crisis of care (Dowling, 2021; Fraser, 2016a). In the exacerbation of the latter brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, grassroots self-organized mutualism addressed precarization and isolation by distributing essential goods, offering psychological support, and assisting vulnerable groups (Chevée, 2022; della Porta, 2022; Lijster & De Tullio, 2021; Zamponi, 2023). In fact, commoning movements do more than just manage spaces; they also cultivate social relations by generating "relational goods," such as trust and solidarity, which flourish in environments grounded in reciprocity and sharing (Pulcini, 2013). Indeed, commons are often referred to as "connecting structures" because they both depend on and facilitate the creation of social ties in an increasingly isolated and individualistic society (D'Alisa, 2013)

Commoning extends to caring for the built environment, as reclaiming urban commons often involves the revitalization and renewal of neglected structures (Capone, 2019). Examining various solidarity initiatives in Athens, Gutierrez Sanchez (2023) noted that these efforts "infrastructure care through commoning," creating material, social, and affective networks that organize care in diverse, often non-institutional ways. This logic of care emphasizes actions driven by empathy within personal relationships, rather than by individual utility. Also, *The Care Manifesto*, published during the pandemic, highlights the importance of commons for

care and proposes the concept of “caring communities” (The Care Collective, 2020). Their framework has been linked to Subaltern Studies by Sciarelli, who has analyzed caring and commoning in Scugnizzo, another Neapolitan commons (2024). Blau (2021) has also explicitly linked care and commoning, showing both the potential and the contradictions of pastoralist communities caring for their socionatures. Care is considered a key issue not only for the maintenance of urban commons but also for their expansion. In particular, it is a fundamental element both materially and for producing new commoning subjectivities, in particular for newcomers (Ruiz Cayuela, 2021, p. 20). The importance of care for newcomers is something highlighted not just for commons movements but for other movements too, such as the housing one, for which Santos proposes the concept of “participatory care” as a fundamental activity for making newcomers in social movements feel part of the struggle (2020, pp. 129–130).<sup>19</sup>

Santos’ case study is the housing movement in Barcelona. In the last few years, housing movements and critical approaches to housing are the sites where the frameworks of care, commons, and commoning have been used the most—the house being indeed the quintessential site of social reproduction, though mostly from the perspective of critical geography. Still in Barcelona, for example, Ruiz Cayuela and García-Lamarca focused on reproductive urban commons as popular infrastructures, by looking at decommodified and collectively managed housing alternatives, or housing squats, through the lens of the reproductive commons (2023). Others have looked at co-housing in the UK to explore its potential to embody a feminist commons (Fernández Arrigoitia et al., 2023). Moving to the US, and adopting a more intersectional standpoint enriched by prospectives informed by blackness and indigeneity, a series of papers formed part of a symposium entirely dedicated to housing movements and care (Fields et al., 2024).

It is not casual that the metropolises where my case studies are, Barcelona and Naples, are hotspots for further analyses of the intersection between care and commoning (see chapters 2 and 3). In Barcelona, Manuela Zechner explored the development of childcare commons and municipal micropolitics, following Spain’s 15M movement. She examined how grassroots movements, particularly those focused on social reproduction and feminist politics, led to the emergence of commons-based municipalism. In particular, particularly highlighting the role of mothers’ networks and communal nurseries in creating strong care infrastructures in the

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<sup>19</sup> More on this in section 4, where I look at collective action and care.

neighborhood of Poble Sec (2021). Similarly, Kussy et al. critically analyzed Barcelona's municipalist platform *Barcelona en Comú*'s policies concerning (particularly domestic) care and the commons and gave an overall assessment of the merits and limitations of "care municipalism" (2022).

In Naples Recano and Santi have argued that care at different scales is a fundamental aspect of what the communities of the vast network of urban commons in the city do. They argue that commoners are close to the needs of people and address them directly through mutual aid networks, hence engaging in a politics of care. Sciarelli offered fresh insights into care practices within urban commons by applying the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies. In particular, he analyzed the caring practices organized within the Scugnizzo Liberato, one of the urban commons of the city of Naples, and shed light on the interaction between these urban commons and its institutions, concluding that "the condition for a positive interaction between commoning experiences and municipal institutions lies in the preservation of the political and organizational autonomy of the commons" (Sciarelli, 2024, p. 1751).

#### **4. Collective Action And Care**

Radical care politics, as theorized in this chapter, is an ethos of collective action: a lived, relational stance centered on the direct, material, and affective labor of sustaining life collectively. But how does this ethos become operative within movements? Through what forms of collective action does care emerge, circulate, and acquire political force? To begin answering these questions, I must direct the analytical gaze toward the textures of the everyday. The concept of everyday politics brings to light the political dimensions of practices and relationships that have traditionally been considered private, intimate, or apolitical, precisely the domains where care often resides. As Forno and Wahlen (2022) argue, everyday politics invites us to recognize how political agency unfolds beyond visible claim-making, in mundane yet meaningful practices. Echoing this insight, feminist scholarship has long insisted that the personal is political: a claim that not only challenges the public/private divide, but also reclaims reproduction, interdependence, and emotional labor as political concerns (Felski, 2000, pp. 77–98).

This perspective is particularly evident in discussions of sustainability and feminist critique. Scholars have shown how the everyday can be a terrain of both individualized, neoliberalized

behaviors, such as political consumerism (Stolle & Micheletti, 2013), or collective grassroots experimentation (Meyer, 2015). Dal Gobbo (2022), for example, highlights how environmental-justice and global feminist movements center reproductive labor and ecological interdependence in their critiques and practices, positioning care as an indispensable axis of collective transformation. Within this expanded field of the political, the three concepts of direct action, mutual aid, and prefiguration offer key insights into how radical care politics is enacted in practice. Direct action emphasizes the immediacy and unmediated nature of collective intervention; mutual aid foregrounds horizontal solidarity, interdependence, and survival outside state institutions; and prefiguration focuses on the enactment of desired social relations in the here and now. While none of these fully encapsulates radical care politics, each offers a critical vantage point for understanding how care moves from ethical principle to collective practice. Among them, prefiguration proves especially fertile, for it not only anticipates alternative futures through present-day relations but also foregrounds the tensions between spontaneity, informality, and the infrastructuring of care. These tensions will be further developed in the final part of this section, where I propose the concepts of *prefigurative spontaneity* and *deliberative care infrastructuring* as tools for grasping how care is organized and contested in urban commons movements.

#### **4.1 Direct Action**

Direct action is a foundational concept within many radical movements, particularly in the Anglo-American and anarchist traditions. It broadly refers to political practices that intervene directly in social reality without relying on institutional intermediaries such as political parties, courts, or elected officials. Moore and Shepard (2013), in the *Wiley Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements*, define direct action as a “strategic political activity in which users seek redress by targeting the people, institutions, and practices that they wish to change.” Typical forms of direct action include occupations and blockades, sabotage and slow-downs, public witnessing, play and mockery, and, in some contexts, property destruction or violence against material infrastructure.

While direct action likely predates formal political systems, the term itself was popularized at the end of the 19th century, especially among anarchist thinkers such as Emma Goldman and Peter Kropotkin (Moore & Shepard, 2013). These traditions emphasized the ethical and practical necessity of *acting without permission*, asserting collective agency through unmediated disruption and construction. Contemporary accounts continue to highlight the

relevance of direct action for radical democratic politics. David Graeber (2002), for instance, argues that direct action represents a rejection of politics-as-appeal in favor of politics-as-intervention—a “form that itself prefigures an alternative.” His ethnography of the Global Justice Movement (Graeber, 2010) shows how direct actions function not just as tactics, but as ethical performances of the world activists want to live in.

More recently, social movement scholars have reframed the notion as “direct social action” in order to define a more specific set of actions which, nonetheless, follow the same general principle of unmediated politics (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015). In fact, the authors define direct social actions as “actions that do not primarily focus upon claiming something or other from the state or other power holders, whether this might be seen in revolutionary or reformist terms, but that instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself” (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015, p. 369). The authors see “direct social action” as a way to conceptualize the same phenomenon that has been otherwise labelled as “alternative forms of resilience, mutualism and prefigurative politics” such as “boycotts, solidarity action, political consumerism, alternative finance (e.g. crowd funding, food banks), collective purchasing groups, occupations, self-management, free legal advice and medical services” (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015, p. 369). The term “direct social action,” in fact, has been used interchangeably with “mutual aid” (Zamponi, 2023), to which I turn in the next subsection.

In the context of radical care politics, direct action helps foreground the unmediated, often improvised, and situated character of many care practices. It captures how care can operate as a form of embodied refusal: interrupting capitalist carelessness by meeting needs directly and collectively. Yet immediacy raises further questions of duration, continuity, and organizational form—questions that mutual aid, and later prefigurative politics, will address more explicitly.

## **4.2 Mutual Aid**

Mutual aid is an old term, historically rooted in anarchist circles, particularly in the US and the UK, which has recently experienced a resurgence to describe various solidarity initiatives brought about by social movements in response to the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020 (Zamponi, 2023). Its historical significance is exemplified by the contributions of Russian anarchist geographer Peter Kropotkin, whose seminal work, *Mutual Aid: An Illuminated Factor of Evolution* (2021), first published in 1902, argues that cooperation is just as decisive a factor in natural selection as competition.

The resurgence of the term is attested by the increasing number of recent writings on the topic (Chevéé, 2022; Reese & Johnson, 2022; Sitrin et al., 2020). Among the most notable contributions is Dean Spade's *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* (Spade, 2020a), a book written by a US-based transgender activist, which has gained considerable success and been translated into multiple languages. Spade defines mutual aid as "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them" (Spade, 2020a, p. 5). Yet, he also emphasizes its prefigurative potential: "At its best, mutual aid actually produces new ways of living where people get to create systems of care and generosity that address harm and foster well-being" (Spade, 2020a, p. 1).

This definition aligns closely with the previous discussion on care politics, particularly in its emphasis on collective efforts to meet others' needs. The reference to the creation of "systems of care" resonates directly with the core values of radical care politics, especially when mutual aid is practiced at its highest potential. Moreover, the understanding of mutual aid as an explicitly political act is integral to the ways in which it intersects with notions of care, solidarity, and autonomy. Its paradigmatic expression emerges in disaster contexts, through initiatives such as community kitchens, self-managed health clinics, and housing reconstruction brigades. In such settings, the fulfillment of basic needs becomes a matter of life and death, and these initiatives play a vital role in enabling survival.

In terms of the relationship between mutual aid and direct action, the connection seems relatively straightforward: mutual aid is one of the various manifestations of unmediated politics within the broader spectrum of direct action. While direct actions may encompass a wide range of practices that do not necessarily involve mutual aid, the latter unquestionably falls within the broader category of direct, unmediated political actions. However, the relationship these two concepts and prefiguration is more intricate and requires further unpacking.

Mutual aid resonates with prefigurative politics insofar as it enacts alternative social relations in the present. This link is crucial: mutual aid does not only address immediate needs but also gestures toward different ways of organizing society. It is to this prefigurative dimension that

I now turn, in order to better understand how radical care politics embodies and contests the temporalities of political transformation.

### 4.3 Prefiguration

The concept of prefigurative politics was first conceptualized by Carl Boggs in a 1978 essay published on Radical America called *Marxism, Prefigurative Politics, and the Problems of Workers' Control*. The main point of the essay was to present prefiguration as a strategic revolutionary alternative to Leninism and structural reformism, which “provide no real alternative to the bureaucratic hierarchy, the power of the centralized state, and the social division of labor characteristic of bourgeois society” because “both strategies have actually reinforced the growth of modern bureaucratic capitalism through their obsession with state authority, ‘efficiency’ and discipline” (Boggs, 1977, p. 99). Hence, Boggs underlined how:

In the past century, the most direct attack on statist Marxism has come from what might be called the prefigurative tradition, which begins with the nineteenth century anarchists and includes the syndicalists, council communists and the New Left. By “prefigurative,” I mean the embodiment, within the ongoing political practice of a movement, of those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are the ultimate goal (1977, p. 100).

The vision, as Boggs’ text and others testify, was not that this would suffice to overthrow capitalism, but rather on the logic that if new concrete projects embodying alternative political practice and relations aren’t tried out as much as possible *before* a crisis makes capitalism tremble, if dual power structures are not created before a moment of *kairos* interrupts the slow pace of *kronos*, then how do we expect even the most well-meaning people to know how to practice a different politics and embody different social relations *after* the revolution?

Both strategically and ethically, a pillar of prefiguration has been often identified in the means-ends equivalence: the idea that the ends of social transformation cannot be achieved with means that are inconsistent with them and that the difference between ones and the others must be as little as possible; or that the ends should be anticipated to the present to the broadest extent possible. The opposite here, as underlined by Boggs himself, were revolutionary strategies based on rigid hierarchies, or the exclusion of women. Strategies that postponed the dissolution of hierarchies or the inclusion of women to a second stage, yet to arrive. This second stage,

however, following both anarchist thinkers at the beginning of the century and the historical record of state socialism, would then fail to materialize.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War new anti-capitalist movements with a strong prefigurative character arose. The Global Justice Movement was kickstarted by the Zapatista insurgency guided precisely by prefigurative lemmas of “building the new in the shell of the old”, of “changing the world without taking power.” Since then, prefiguration has had a prominent role in social movements’ strategies, and an increasing literature has covered it, particularly in social movements’ studies. The concept has a clear connection to everyday politics, with commoning, as well as with my own definition of radical care politics: directly meeting others’ needs and placing care at the center of politics can be surely seen as anticipating in the here and now the kind of society and politics envisioned for tomorrow; that is, it is prefigurative. The term, however, has been used more and more widely in Social Movement Studies, arguably losing precision and clarity over what precisely it was intended to cover. Yates and de Moor in a recent article note that, particularly in the period 2005-20, the term has been attributed loosely to multiple different political activities in predominantly left-wing social movements (2022). I will now turn to these elements of confusion and overlaps.

#### **4.4 Why These Concepts Are Not Enough**

Luke Yates, a prominent scholar of prefigurative politics, writes that the main point of unclarity in its definition lies in the fact that prefigurative politics is understood in two main ways. Some understand it as a logic that underpins political action, that he indicates as the “means-ends equivalence”, for which he cites as examples Graeber and Boggs, while for others it coincides with the “construction of alternatives”, an additional set of activities and/or goals, that happens alongside contentious politics, and not as something underpinning it, such as for Breines and Epstein (Yates, 2015b). Yates argues that these two approaches are linked by a third element, the notion of “prolepsis”, meaning that “to prefigure is to anticipate or enact some feature of an ‘alternative world’ in the present, as though it has already been achieved.” (Yates, 2015b, p. 4)

While I agree with the centrality of prolepsis, Yate’s three-fold distinction seems to me analytically confusing. If means are associated with the present and ends are what is supposed to be achieved in the future, it is unclear what the difference would be between means-ends

equivalence and prolepsis, which is precisely about anticipating some feature of the desired future (the ends) in the present (as a means). Among the three logics, the one that most significantly seems to define prefiguration, also following the very meaning suggested by the term (to “pre-figure”) seems to be the one of prolepsis. First, this is because, as I argued, means-ends equivalence is substantially equivalent to prolepsis. Second, it is because building alternatives is not enough to define prefiguration, as it can potentially happen without any prefigurative logic, that is, without any politics or vision of the future.

Yates argues that a more accurate definition “combines the experimental creating of ‘alternatives’ within either mobilization-related or everyday activities, with attempts to ensure their future political relevance.” (Yates, 2015b, p. 13). While this is a good description of what happens in most prefigurative practices, such a definition renounces to refer to prolepsis (or means-ends equivalence) by alleging that analytically it is not clear enough, thus describing prefiguration as a set of practices rather than as a logic of political action, or a strategy of revolutionary politics. Instead, I believe that keeping prolepsis in the definition of prefigurative politics entails being closer to its original (perhaps narrower) definition of a logic or strategy of political action and can avoid the problem identified by Yates and de Moor of prefiguration doing too much as a concept; that is, to encompass too many (potentially all) politically activities, hence resulting in an analytically meaningless term. Differently from these authors, however, I propose to avoid this not by discarding the notion of prolepsis, but by making it analytically useful by considering the element of temporalities that it entails. In other words, I propose to look meticulously at social movements’ actors’ understanding of the temporalities of their activism to dissect whether their politics accounts for a prefigurative one. The fact that prefiguration cannot be reduced to a set of actions or to an underlying logic closely parallels the way care cannot be understood solely in terms of values or value, nor as just language or just practice.

The advantage of such an approach that maintains the complexity of prolepsis in the definition of prefiguration is to be able to distinguish it more easily from concepts presented above, that are otherwise similar in many respects. First, they have a similar genealogy grounded in anarchist thought and strategy, where the common glue is the collapse of means and ends (Baker, 2023). While not only related to anarchist movements, they are associated with a broader notion of left-libertarianism (Taibo, 2019). Graeber, for example, notices that Occupy Wall Street embodied four fundamental anarchist principles: (1) the refusal to recognize the

legitimacy of existing institutions, which Graeber links to the principle of direct action; (2) the refusal to accept the legitimacy of the existing legal order; (3) The refusal to create an internal hierarchy, but instead to create a form of consensus-based direct democracy; (4) The embrace of prefigurative politics (Graeber, 2011). These four principles are hard to disentangle. Note, for example, that Graeber famously defined direct action as “the defiant insistence on acting as if one is already free” (Graeber, 2013b), implying the same proleptic logic of prefiguration. Or that, consensus-based democracy (point 3 in Graeber) is one of the primary examples in the literature to describe prefiguration (point 4 in Graeber) (Maeckelbergh, 2011a).

Some of the keywords mentioned so far (means-ends, prefiguration, direct action) are nicely related to each other by Ruth Kinna’s explanation of anarchists’ understanding of utopia:

The consistent feature of anarchist thinking about utopianism is the prefigurative framing of social transformation — a framing that in different ways was designed to challenge principles of certainty and inevitability. Utopia was not held up as “the end” in the means-ends relationship, but invoked in order to assert the possibility of different alternatives, each dependent on direct action and the principle of desire. As utopians, anarchists elaborated strategies for change consistent with their anti-authoritarian principles precisely in order to resist unspecified abstract utopias and blueprints.

(Kinna, 2017, p. 210)

Indeed, mutual aid is often considered prefigurative by default—after all, the idea of mutual aid as prefigurative strategy was central to Kropotkin’s view, being mutual aid precisely where means and ends collapse.<sup>20</sup> Direct action is also intimately linked to prefiguration, as testified by Graeber’s definition. Yates affirms that prefiguration is closely in line with the concept of non-violent direct action, as discussed by Epstein (1993), who sees authoritarianism and coercion as inherently indefensible (Yates, 2015b). Similarly, Moore and Shepard (2013) affirm that “participants in direct action often see themselves as enacting the values that are important to them, such as fellowship and non-hierarchical relations.” Finally, direct social actions (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015), a synonym for mutual aid practices underlying its characteristic as a specific form of direct action, is often considered prefigurative.

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Kropotkin, ‘Anarchism: Its Philosophy and Ideal’ in Baldwin (ed.) Kropotkin’s Revolutionary Pamphlets, p. 140.).

But direct action and mutual aid can also *not* be prefigurative. Looking at the specific temporalities of direct action and mutual aid initiatives can shed light on whether they represent prefiguration, thus clarifying the meaning of prefiguration and its distinctiveness from direct action and mutual aid. This can not only be done by looking at whether activists self-consciously and explicitly use the term prefiguration, though the latter can obviously be an important factor. Nevertheless, I believe that the term holds an analytical function also when prefiguration is an implicit, underlying logic, and that this is related to temporalities.

## **5. From Prefigurative Spontaneity to Deliberative Care Infrastructuring**

Throughout the thesis (especially in Chapter 5) I describe l'Asilo's politics as one radically committed to self-organization without hierarchies, with a governance model that is neither fully structured nor purely improvised. I conceptualize this as *prefigurative spontaneity*, a term capturing the deliberate rejection of fixed organizational roles and decision-making hierarchies in favor of fluid, voluntary participation, as a way to enact in the present the free, creative, experimental and collaborative relations envisioned by its activists/artists.

Prefigurative politics involves enacting a movement's envisioned future social forms in the present yet it does not necessarily demand radically horizontal or leaderless structures (Yates & de Moor, 2022). The concept of prefigurative spontaneity pinpoints the specific scenario where activists deliberately refuse fixed roles or formal protocols, believing in a specific "live now as if free" approach (Graeber, 2013b) as the most faithful embodiment of desired post-capitalist relations. Unlike other forms of prefiguration that might imply different forms of structured coordination, l'Asilo's stance amplifies spontaneity, raising distinct challenges around how to ensure that spontaneity does not inadvertently replicate social hierarchies or inequalities. This tension between a principled aversion to roles, duties, and accountabilities, and the risk of re-entrenching hidden power, will be explored in Chapter 5.

To conceptualize the way in which l'Asilo's activists addressed care issues vis-à-vis the commitment to prefigurative spontaneity, I will introduce the concept of *deliberative care infrastructuring*. In Science and Technology Studies (STS), infrastructuring describes how infrastructures are continuously formed, sustained, altered, and contested in actual practice (Jiménez, 2014; Star & Bowker, 2002). Researchers use this term to emphasize that infrastructures are relational (arising through interactions among individuals, technologies, and

institutions), processual (constantly being remade), situated (rooted in particular contexts), and political (shaping and shaped by power, access, and exclusion). Star and Bowker (2002) are often credited with being the first using “infrastructure” as a verb. Their work underlines that infrastructure typically remains invisible until it malfunctions and that people’s experiences of it vary according to their positionality. Feminist and postcolonial STS scholars (e.g., Bowker, Edwards, Berlant) have shown how infrastructures both reproduce and contest social inequalities—acting simultaneously as sites of exclusion and of potential transformation. Berlant (2016) conceptualizes infrastructures as “forms of life made out of social relations” (p. 394), through which certain modes of being are enabled while others are foreclosed. Because we are differentially entangled in classed, gendered, and racialized structures, infrastructural experiences are always uneven.

Turning to *care* specifically, Alam and Houston (2020) conceptualize care infrastructures as flexible, context-dependent systems of “caring with” (Tronto 2013) other beings, human and otherwise. Rather than rigid, top-down constructs, these care infrastructures emerge through collective, hands-on labor, grounded in feminist care ethics and democratic ideals. They take shape, particularly, in environments of marginalization and precariousness (Power, 2019; Power et al., 2022; Traill et al., 2024), relying on networks of mutual support instead of formal institutions.

Puig de la Bellacasa prompts to ask questions such as “How do we build caring relationships while recognizing divergent positions? How do those we study perceive the way we think-with their practices?” (2012, p. 207) The answers to these questions, she reminds, are always situated. When placed within prefigurative politics, these insights help me to conceptualize deliberative care infrastructuring as a form of experimental, partial, and processual organization of care that remains “in the making” (Silver, 2023, p. 205), constantly adjusted through everyday struggles. At l’Asilo, this involved embedding care into organizational, procedural, and affective practices amid crises. These efforts were not about replacing spontaneity with bureaucracy but about sustaining care commitments without compromising fluid and horizontal experimentation in the political process.

Deliberative care infrastructuring refers to a dynamic, collective effort to embed care into the everyday life of a commons through facilitation, peer accountability, and shared reflexivity, in an attempt to avoid care crises and burnout, but also bureaucratization. Drawing from feminist

care ethics, this practice foregrounds the uneven distribution of emotional and relational labor; from STS, it views care not as ethics or alone, but as an infrastructure. As such, it differs from complete structurelessness, which disavows intentional governance; from ad hoc voluntarism, which fails to sustain shared responsibility over time; and from bureaucratic rationality, which imposes rigid times, roles, and procedures. It insists that sustaining the commons requires internal, evolving infrastructures of care, however fragile, partial, or contested they may be.

## **6. Toward Radical Care Politics**

Radical care politics, in my definition, is an ethos of collective action. In the preceding sections, I have laid the foundations for this definition by reconstructing how care has been politicized both historically and semantically, and by distinguishing care as value and as values. I developed an understanding of care as a value-producing activity, essential to sustaining life, and as a terrain of political struggle over what and who is deemed valuable. Drawing on feminist ethics and social reproduction theory, I showed how care is structurally devalued under capitalism, yet foundational to both economic systems and social life. I then engaged Graeber's anthropological theory of value to argue that politics involves not only a contest over resources but also over what constitutes value itself. Building on anarchist and prefigurative politics, I proposed care as a situated ethos of collective action, emerging from practices such as mutual aid, commoning, direct democracy, and non-hierarchical collaboration. Finally, I located this ethos within the framework of urban commons, where care becomes infrastructured through governance arrangements and everyday negotiations. But how have social movements scholars, specifically, addressed the concept of care so far? Answering this question, along with the preceding discussion, provides a foundation for situating radical care politics within existing scholarship and outlines the specific aspects that will be explored in the empirical chapters of this thesis.

Until recently, Social Movement Studies has largely overlooked the importance of care for social movements, despite few scholars emphasizing the significance of empowering individuals through relationships within the expanded private sphere and highlighting the crucial role women play in fostering these more caring approaches to action (Neuhouser, 1995; Stall & Stoecker, 1998). In this sense, the study of care in social movements is tightly connected to the study of gender in social movements, that started in the mid-1980s and is now an established subfield (Reger, 2021). Mobilization, participation and internal hierarchies started

to be understood crucially differently thanks to the introduction of a gender lens, for example by finding societal patriarchal biases in social movements, no matter how progressive (McAdam, 1992; Zemlinskaya, 2010). Since the 1990s, dissatisfaction grew with the too strategic and rationalistic view of culture in collective action of the resource mobilization approach, hence the “collective behavior” approach stressed the role of emotions in the production and reproduction of social movements (Snow & Benford, 1992), starting an extremely fruitful line of inquiry (Goodwin et al., 2001; Gould, 2009; Jasper, 2011)

More recently, however, scholars have started to link care and social movements more directly. Some, have looked at how movements frame care: care as a bridging frame in Italy during the pandemic (della Porta & Lavizzari, 2022) and a way to frame solidarity in campaigns focused on migration, housing and health care (Caciagli & della Porta, 2025); the meaning activists attribute to “care” in refugee solidarity movements in Europe (Milan & Martini, 2024). Others have looked at social movement activities explicitly through the lenses of care ethics: analyzing the housing movement in Barcelona (Santos, 2020); the politics of everyday life in the UK amid austerity (Jupp, 2022); mutual aid groups in Spain and their contribution to “caring democracy” (Diz et al., 2022); and the gendered politics of care within Extinction Rebellion<sup>21</sup> (Gardner et al., 2024).

A couple of studies are particularly relevant to my discussion. Santos (2020, pp. 129–130) focuses on social movement practices that can be understood as care. In particular, he underlines three key aspects: (1) emotional care, where emotional bonds strengthen social networks; (2) identity care, which involves the transformation of individual and collective identities within the movement, leading to empowerment; and (3) participatory care, aimed at removing barriers to involvement by equipping new members with necessary skills and knowledge.

Milan and Martini (2024) focus on activists’ understanding of care. They argue that for solidarity activists supporting refugees at the borders along some European migratory routes, care has a threefold meaning: non-hierarchical, political, and transformative. The non-hierarchical aspect influences both internal group dynamics and interactions with external groups. Care is also political, as it responds to healthcare crises and restrictions on freedom of

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<sup>21</sup> A prominent global environmentalist social movement organization focused on climate justice.

movement. Additionally, it is prefigurative, as these acts of care challenge existing inequalities, envisioning a world where freedom of movement and healthcare are universal rights (Milan & Martini, 2024).

However, no work has examined, ethnographically, the *process* unfolding at the historical time in which progressive social movement actors started framing care as their central political concept and what did “care” *do* to urban commons movements, as well as what did urban commons movements precisely *do* with care? I aim to consider radical care politics as a *distinct* ethos of collective action that emerges in specific forms of collective action (commoning) and at a specific time in history (the critical juncture of the pandemic and the pervading global polycrisis). In my two cases, I investigate commons activists putting care at the very center of their discussions (l’Asilo), and practices (Àgora). I go beyond looking at movement activities through the lenses of care ethics or interviewing activists about the meaning they attribute to care. Instead, I provide a comprehensive and dynamic picture, based on a two-year-long ethnography, of how commons movements understand and give political value to care, highlighting the everyday tensions involved in this non-linear process, which speak to broader political discussions on issues such as democracy, intersectionality, or the boundedness of communities.

In sum, this chapter provides the theoretical foundations of this thesis. Furthermore, it shall be useful for understanding the elements that compose my definition of radical care politics, as an ethos of collective action centered on recognizing and directly addressing others’ emotional and material needs while highlighting these actions as the core value-creating activity in society. I conclude this chapter by summarizing it, focusing in particular on what is relevant for this definition: I have defined “politics” as the struggle to accumulate value but more importantly to define what value is; “care” is a fundamental value-creating activity, in that, on the one hand, defines value (in this sense, it is a value), that is, what is necessary and desirable in society, and on the other that produces value, in that nurturing and maintaining other people and their life-sustaining web is what societies and economies are fundamentally for. This is what “care politics” stands for. But this thesis is dedicated to a specific aspect of this politics: to how social movements engaged in commoning in urban environments, or urban commons movements, center this politics as their fundamental logic of collective action. To specify this, I add the “radical” adjective, as Hobart and Kneese do in their editorial for a special issue on Radical Care, to distance the concept from neoliberal interpretations and to root it in praxis:

specifically in grassroots collective action, solidarity, mutual aid, autonomous direct action, and non-hierarchical collaboration (2020). This helps to distinguish the collectivized, grassroots care that social movements are currently exploring from other, wider, understandings of care and its politics.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

In this chapter I explain how a militant ethnographic design, grounded in a relational ontology informed by feminist ethics of care, addresses the broad research question: how do commons movements articulate and practice the concept of care? In the pages that follow, I first situate myself and justify a participatory-militant methodological framework shaped by care ethics; next I outline the research design that progressed from desk mapping to purposive selection of l'Asilo (Naples) and Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez (Barcelona); I then introduce an ethnographic data generation strategy centered on sixteen months of immersive participant observation, complemented by sixteen semi-structured interviews, as well as participatory activist methods such as a co-produced survey, a participatory video, and collaborative gardening. I then used a software-assisted coding process to integrate these sources into a coherent analytic chain. Parallely, I complemented empirical data collection with archival research and a historical reconstruction of the semantic evolution of the keyword “care”. Reflexivity underpins this ethnographic study throughout the whole process, so this is what I turn to in the first section.

#### **1 Positionality & Politics of Location**

##### **1.1 Who Is Speaking, From Where, And Why It Matters**

I write from a position shaped by both historical and ongoing forms of privilege: I am highly educated and come from a middle-class background with high cultural capital; I am white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, and Southern European. While supporting myself with modest and precarious academic salaries, I remain embedded in structures of privilege that shape my perspective and access within academic and social spaces. Feminist standpoint theories explain that one's position shapes not only what can be seen but also how things can be understood, and what is likely to be overlooked. Privilege tends to naturalize its own worldview, projecting partiality as universality (Haraway, 1988). This becomes especially consequential when researching a concept like care, which has been theorized and politicized

from feminist and subaltern standpoints, and has been practiced mostly by women or dissident identities, often positioned at the intersections of multiple forms of marginalization.

As someone who does not share those experiential standpoints, I recognize the epistemic limitation embedded in my perspective. Yet, rather than disqualify myself, I follow Motta and Nilsen (2011) in treating subaltern knowledge not as confined to a specific identity or constituency, but as revolutionary thought with the potential to subvert dominant frameworks. In this spirit, I consider it necessary for privileged (male) researchers to engage seriously with feminist theory and methods. Too often, men refrain from doing so, leaving the interpretive labor of feminism to women. I see this avoidance as both a political and epistemological failure: it re-inscribes patriarchal dynamics in knowledge production and limits the transformative reach of feminist insights.

It is also important for me to clarify that my objective is not to contribute to feminist theory *per se*, but to draw from it in order to illuminate dynamics in broader social movements. Doing so requires not only a principled reflexivity but also a practical ethic of engagement. Following Deschner and Dorion (2020), I hold that “the researcher ought to be or to become part of the object of study to become knowledgeable about it” (p. 207), and I take seriously the injunction to use “reflexivity as a key tool for interrogating the impact of the researcher, evaluating the research process and outcomes, and enabling empowerment through the development of a critical consciousness” (Linabary & Hamel, 2017, p. 99). As Wilkinson (2013, p. 133) argues, reflexivity entails grappling with our own “norms, values, self-perception, identities, prior-knowledge and experiences and how [we] influence [our] research process and interpretations.” That is, one’s positionality.

Foregrounding my positionality allows me to decenter my own assumptions and remain attentive to how care is defined, contested, and reimagined by those who live it daily. My decade-plus involvement in grassroots movements (student, migrant-solidarity, ecological/degrowth, and commons-based) has functioned less as insider capital than as an accountability mechanism. It exposed me to critiques from differently positioned actors and reminded me that alliances are contingent, negotiated and revocable. Accordingly, this chapter’s methodological choices aim to translate that critical self-awareness into research practice: reflexive writing, dialogic data generation and analytic strategies that privilege participants’ categories of meaning over my own. By making the situatedness of my inquiry

explicit, I invite readers to evaluate the claims that follow in light of both their insights and their inevitable blind spots. These reflections on standpoint directly informed my decision-making when selecting and inhabiting my field sites.

## **1.2 Locating The Field: Proximity, Estrangement, And Reflexivity**

Ethnography bears the burden of its colonial past (and, in a number of ways, present) (e.g. Asad 1995); thus, practicing it today requires a constant effort in decolonizing it. It seems to me that doing observant participation in contexts in which one has some biographical, historical, geographical, or identity-related sense of belonging and legitimacy is an important step in (at least) mitigating its connotation of a potentially colonial and extractive practice (Pachirat, 2018) especially if one is not researching the relatively dominant from the bottom-up (see Ho 2009), but grassroots movements. In other words, as someone who identifies as a Southern European, or Mediterranean, I deliberately chose to focus on Southern European movements, in two cities that I have some connection with, rather than focusing on “the distant other.” Yet, as I have not grown up in any of these cities, they are still sufficiently unfamiliar to generate an estrangement that makes it less likely to produce theoretical insights that are merely demonstrating a theoretical common sense (Shah, 2017); or, in other words, it makes it possible “to have a deliberate alienation from the world under study in order to understand it as it cannot understand itself.” (Hastrup 2004, 468)

I gained access to the field through longstanding friendships that were involved in the two commons. These relational gateways shaped who initially trusted me, underscoring that access is never neutral: it is already a product of positionality, prior embeddedness, and trust. To keep this positionality analytically productive rather than paralyzing, I relied on reflexive practice grounded in my field routine. Daily fieldnotes included a reflexive tier that tracked emotional responses and complicities. Periodic analytic memos distilled patterns spotted in the diary, linked them to theory and flagged questions requiring further observation. Informal conversations (often during post-assembly meals or drinks) served as real-time sounding boards, prompting me to reconsider assumptions and language. These practices operationalize the feminist mandate to interrogate how the researcher is part of the research process while remaining faithful to the mostly unstructured, militant ethos of the fieldwork context.

Foregrounding my politics of location clarifies the scope and limits of the knowledge I can credibly offer. My interpretations are filtered through masculine, white and class-privileged

lenses, but also shaped by long-term collaborative immersion in the social worlds that produce the practices of care under study. By rendering this positionality transparent, I invite readers and movement interlocutors to evaluate not only what I claim but how I came to those claims. In so doing, I refuse the assumption of universality, offering instead a situated contribution. This positional awareness clarifies the ethical-methodological ground on which I stand, which will be the foundation of this methodology and of the whole thesis.

## **2 Ontology, Epistemology, And Militant Approach**

### **2.1 Relational Ontology and Co-Constructed Interpretivism**

To examine how commons movements articulate and practice care, this study is grounded in three interlocking pillars. First, I introduce a relational ontology that locates social reality in practices of interdependence. Second, I outline an epistemology that treats knowledge as situated and co-constructed. Third, I explain how militant ethnography embeds the researcher within movements rather than observing from afar. Then, I demonstrate the alignment of these pillars with the guiding research question, and I address potential critiques.

This study begins from the premise that social reality comes into being through relations of interdependence and practice mediated by value rather than through discrete, pre-given entities (Bourdieu, 1977; Emirbayer, 1997; Graeber, 2013a). Drawing on feminist ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993), feminist social-reproduction analyses of value and commons (Federici, 2018; Fraser, 2016b) and Graeber’s anthropological theory of value (Graeber, 2001)—itself indebted to Mauss’ gift economy (1954 [1925])—*care* is treated as a collectively accomplished practice. Commons movements materialize care through discourse, infrastructural experiments, and practices that are always in flux within their socio-material environments.

Given a relational ontology, knowledge must be understood as both situated and constructed through practice. Following feminist standpoint theory, all knowledge is rooted in everyday experience (Collins, 2009; D. E. Smith, 1997) and is therefore partial and positioned. Harding’s call for “strong objectivity” reminds us to account for our own standpoint rather than erase it (2013). Feminist scholars further insist that reflexivity is indispensable: researchers must interrogate how their norms, values, identities, and emotional investments shape both data collection and interpretation (Deschner & Dorion, 2020; Finlay, 2002; Wilkinson, 2013). In

the context of this study, it means observing, participating and analyzing how actors articulate, problematize, and practice care while continually reflecting on how my presence and positionality enter the interpretive loop.

To connect empirical materials and theory I employ an abductive logic, iterating between field observations and conceptual categories (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This iterative process allows insights emerging from participant observation, interviews, and participatory methods to sharpen theoretical constructs, while concepts drawn from care ethics, commons literature, and social movement studies, in turn, guide new empirical questions. Such reflexive constructivism ensures that the knowledge produced is neither wholly imposed nor uncritically emergent, but co-constructed through engaged dialogue with commons movements and attentive to both their meanings and my own interpretive frames.

The epistemological base of this thesis is also directly connected with care ethics. The latter does more than prescribe a mode of practice; it constitutes a radical epistemic challenge to the individualistic, utilitarian frameworks that underpin dominant knowledges (e.g. Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993; Bubeck 1995; Folbre 2009). By insisting that caring relations are foundational to what it means to be human, this lineage problematizes the very categories of self-interest and rational calculation that define mainstream epistemologies. In this sense, movements' embrace of care is not merely practical or discursive, but also deeply political: as movements' epistemologies and politics proceed parallelly (della Porta & Pavan, 2017). In many ways, the assumption is not so different from what classic anarchist thinkers more than a century ago were already arguing about mutual aid and cooperation vis-à-vis competition (Kropotkin [1902] 2021)<sup>22</sup>, and it is not casual that some are looking at mutual aid as the quintessential care practice (Spade, 2020b).

Building on this emancipatory genealogy, it becomes imperative to recognize that the pursuit of “disembodied” objectivity risks reproducing the very subjectivities it claims to transcend. Claiming to be transmitters of an objective, technical, truth or “disembodied knowledge ‘about’ the world [ends up] reproducing the dominant subjectivity” (Russell 2015, 225). Then, I see admitting such partisanship as an act of epistemological honesty, and as the ultimate basis of

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<sup>22</sup> Though, without the contemporary intersectional gender perspective that characterizes most reflections on care.

interpretative epistemologies. Specifically, I chose to study and produce knowledge on social movements' activism around the concept of care because I myself, by participating as an activist in several social movements throughout the years, in parallel to the exploration of relevant concepts and theories at academic institutions, saw in care a politically powerful concept.

## **2.2 Ethnography In Practice: Immersive And Militant**

Ethnography is uniquely suited for this research, as it captures how commons movements experiment with alternative epistemologies (della Porta & Pavan, 2017). Immersion over sixteen months enabled me to document the processes of theorizing, framing, negotiating, and practicing care in real time. And collective processes, in all their indeterminacy, length, and contentedness, are best understood through the immersive, in-depth, and long-term engagement of participant observation (Tilly, 2007), seen as “a unique form of knowledge production that is based on the dialectical relationship between method and theory, which is praxis” (Shah 2017, 56).

While I do not aim to establish proven causalities, my project will not be merely descriptive. Ethnographies, by showing “how” things happen, do help formulate informed hypotheses on “why” they do (Luhtakallio and Eliasoph 2014). They are also key to avoid homogenizing and/or generalizing assumptions, as they shed light on sites of contestation and disagreement, allow to trace fluid conditions, and identify key issues in the way social actors frame the stakes (Plows, 2008)—in my case, in relation to care. In fact, “ethnography is a method that enables researchers to understand what is going on ‘upstream;’ at the grassroots, in often hidden, ‘latent’ (Melucci, 1996) social conditions; and to link this knowledge back to research questions, theories.” (Plows 2008, 1524)

Taking forward the relational-situated stance I outlined above, in this thesis I employ a particular kind of ethnography that is mostly referred to in the literature as “militant”—“a politically engaged form of participant observation carried out from within, rather than outside, grassroots movements” (Juris, 2007, p. 164). I believe that the following quote in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* by David Graeber (2004, p. 12) does the best job at conveying what I consider to be the deepest meaning of militant ethnography:

The practice of ethnography provides at least something of a model [...] of how non-vanguardist revolutionary intellectual practice might work. When one carries out an ethnography, one observes what people do, and then tries to tease out the hidden symbolic, moral, or pragmatic logics that underlie their actions [...] to look at those who are creating viable alternatives, 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.

Hale (2006, p. 108) similarly argues that activist research “is compromised—but also enriched—by opting to position itself squarely amid the tension between utopian ideals and practical politics.” Even without explicitly calling it “militant”, participant observation itself can be, as Shah argues, “a form of production of knowledge through being and action; it is praxis, the process by which theory is dialectically produced and realized in action”, and hence, “a potentially revolutionary praxis because it forces us to question our theoretical presuppositions about the world, produce knowledge that is new, was confined to the margins, or was silenced” (Shah, 2017, p. 45). Starting from this potential, then, it is nonetheless important to notice that participant observation can perfectly disattend it, and be the opposite of a feminist, decolonial, let alone revolutionary, practice. Openly embracing feminist epistemologies, then, is actually particularly useful for developing non-exploitative ethnography (Deschner & Dorion, 2020).

Then, for what concerns the “militant” adjective, if knowledge is always situated and partisan, it could sound redundant. Yet, I believe that it can be useful as, as argued by Juris (2007), it delineates an ethnography done *for and with social movements*, in which the researcher is politically and practically positioned. In addition, my research seems to be particularly prone to activists methods in that, following Hale, “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” (2006, p. 108).

Militant ethnography, in the literature, is an expanding approach to political enquiry which was first delineated by Jeffrey Juris in his article on the movement for global resistance in Barcelona (2007), as well as by other politically-engaged scholars such as David Graeber (2010) and Marianne Maeckelbergh (2011). It builds on a number of previous and contemporary participatory and politically-engaged research approaches but, compared, for example, to

Participatory Action Research, it is considered to rely less on formulaic tenets, and it is more focused on enhancing understandings than on finding useful solutions to problems (Apoifis, 2017).

Importantly, militant ethnography represents one strand within a broader activist research toolbox. As Martínez argues, activist research encompasses not only immersive observation but a spectrum of research, collaborative, and action methods that can be deployed flexibly according to movements' needs and invitations (2024). In this project, I complemented ethnography with participatory techniques (a co-designed survey in Naples and a participatory video co-production and collaborative gardening in Barcelona) to capture diverse forms of knowledge and generate artifacts that serve both analytic and movement purposes.

Rather than providing prescriptions, the ethnographic account is returned to activists as a dialogic gift, keeping ethnography and utopia in constant conversation. This framework rests on two intertwined commitments. First, knowledge is produced *with, not merely about*, movements: I retain analytic responsibility yet circulate emergent interpretations for discussion, accepting revision. Second, praxis is method: field engagement itself is where theory is generated and tested, echoing Shah's (2017, 45) depiction of participant observation as revolutionary practice.

### **2.3 Writing Style, Limitations, And Methodological Coherence**

My writing marries anthropological depth with a sociological structure. Although the dissertation's overall organization (introduction, theory, methods, empirical chapters, conclusion) aligns with sociological conventions, the style of the empirical accounts is distinctly ethnographic: I use thick description, attend to everyday practice, and foreground context. This hybrid approach can feel unsettling. Sociologists may find the degree of immersion and contextual narrative too "anthropological," while anthropologists may find the thesis' structure and the concepts employed overly "sociological." This dual orientation reflects my own intellectual trajectory across sociology and anthropology and my conviction that these "cousin disciplines" can enrich one another. Drawing on the sociological literature on social movements, commons literature (mainly geography), the ethics of care (philosophy and political theory), and others from the social sciences, while integrating anthropological commitments to praxis and lived experience, I interrogate how care is articulated in discourse and performed in practice. This hybrid approach leverages sociological frameworks to guide

the analysis, while ethnographic immersion ensures that patterns are rooted in the rhythms and relations of commons communities. Navigating this middle ground, I allow each tradition's methods and insights to inform and sharpen the other.

Every methodological stance invites critique: militant ethnography, for example, often risks romanticizing activism or dulling critique. However, as the reader will notice, this dissertation does not refrain from (constructive, I hope) critiques to the movements, developed through sustained reflexive practice and abductive analysis that welcomes disconfirming evidence, and which I also understand, from a militant perspective, as an offering to movements. Parallely, the obvious criticism to relational constructivism is its risk to under-state structural factors, a risk I tame by always keeping an eye open for structure, such as tracking how gendered and classed hierarchies shape who performs care and how it is valued. Finally, while it is true that my ethnographic *how* questions might be criticized for lacking a causal focus, good ethnographies help at least generating good hypotheses on causal relations, and I hope mine is one of those.

In sum, I argue that an ontology that centers practice, an epistemology that privileges actors' categories, and a relational-constructivist stance enables simultaneous attention to articulation (language, discourses, imaginaries) and practice (material, affective, conflictual), is best translated into an activist methodology based on militant ethnography, with abductive analysis tying emergent patterns to wider discussions of value, commoning and care.

### **3 Research Question & Design Overview**

This dissertation asks a single, open-ended question: How do commons movements articulate and practice the concept of care? Articulation refers to the meanings and values actors attach to *care* (the discursive and symbolic labor that makes it legible) while practice captures the material, affective and organizational routines through which those meanings are enacted.

To answer this question, I recur to a paired-case comparative ethnography: two field sites (*l'Asilo* in Naples and *Àgora* in Barcelona) were followed ethnographically and then brought into contrastive dialogue to build an abductive explanation, rather than to test pre-selected variables in a controlled comparison. Mine is an ethnographic comparison (Simmons & Smith, 2019) and, more precisely, it can be defined as a sequential one (Tavory & Timmermans, 2020).

It is sequential because I first abductively identified key puzzles in the Neapolitan case and then chose the Barcelona case in light of the emerging theoretical themes. Drawing on Bicum's notion of "casing a concept," that is, "a comparison of the use of a politically constitutive concept that delineates unlike but connected 'cases' of a concept-in-use." (Bicum, 2024, p. 1) Both sites share a commitment to self-management and the commons, yet diverge in demographic composition, organizational scale, and broader context, offering ethnographically and analytically rich contrasts.

A preliminary scoping of Southern-European commons initiatives (combining activist networks, academic and grey literature and online traces) helped me locate l'Asilo within the wider movement ecology (Section 4). Then, I conducted 9-months (Nov. 2021–July 2022) of immersive participant observation supplemented by ten semi-structured interviews and a co-produced survey. After that, I moved to Barcelona and, after about two months of preliminary and exploratory scoping, I chose Àgora as an ideal contrasting case for my study, and I started there a 7-months fieldwork (Jan. 2023–July 2023), complemented by six in-depth interviews, collaborative gardening and the making of a participatory video.

The single research question unfolds analytically along four dimensions that structure the empirical chapters (Ch. 4-7). Chapters 4 and 5 focus exclusively on l'Asilo, while Chapters 6 and 7 develop the cross-case comparison between l'Asilo and Àgora. Each dimension is investigated through a tailored mix of methods:

| Empirical chapter                                                                                                                       | Site(s)         | Core methods                                                                                                                 | Research sub-question(s)                                                                                                            |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ch 4 – The political language of “care”</b>                                                                                          | l'Asilo         | Participant observation; semi-structured interviews; analysis of meeting transcripts & chat conversations                    | How does “care” diffuse in social movements? What meanings are attributed to it? How is it articulated, contested, and transformed? |
| <b>Ch 5 – From Prefigurative Spontaneity to Deliberative Care Infrastructuring: Radical Care Politics in Times of Crisis at l'Asilo</b> | l'Asilo         | Participant observation; semi-structured interviews; analysis of chat conversations; co-produced survey                      | How do activists talking care attempt to land it to political practice?                                                             |
| <b>Ch 6 – Unspoken care? How class shapes care in urban commons</b>                                                                     | l'Asilo & Àgora | Participant observation; semi-structured interviews; co-produced survey; collaborative gardening; participatory video-making | What differences exist (and why) between commons where care is discursive and commons where is embodied?                            |

|                                                                                              |                 |                                                                                                          |                                                     |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Ch 7 – Care For The Neighborhood: Security, Exclusion And Boundaries of Urban Commons</b> | l'Asilo & Àgora | Participant observation; semi-structured interviews; collaborative gardening; participatory video-making | How are boundaries drawn by urban commons movement? |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|

#### 4 Contextual Background and Scoping Frame

A paramount advantage of ethnography in urban contexts is the possibility of closely following movements' day-to-day activities, throughout their different phases, including those that appear as idle ones. If I was to follow, for example, exclusively national or international campaigns, it would be harder to participate in day-to-day local practices and informal conversations. Regarding the choice of urban contexts, it was not an easy one, given that conducting this research in rural ones would have been equally interesting. Though, the choice of the urban context, seemed to me the most appropriate for the density and intensity of social movements in the urban space (Nicholls, 2008).

Care is increasingly present in social movements' discourses and practices in many cities: several could have been chosen. However, the more in-depth qualitative study one wants to conduct, the smaller the unit of investigation. Choosing more than two cities would have meant starting to lose some of ethnography's advantages. The latter, despite having no pretention of generalizability (i.e. what I find in these cities will not automatically apply to others), still admits the possibility of transferability: a “working hypothesis” on other cities and contexts is often viable (Wilkinson, 2013). In other words, while my ethnographic account only analyses care within specific Neapolitan and Barcelonian social movements, it provides tools, or paths, to understand it in other contexts too.

I chose, specifically, Naples and Barcelona for several reasons. Firstly, Naples and Barcelona are two Southern-European cities that constitute paradigmatic cases of the emergence of urban commons movements, urban expressions of those “commons movements” that have been understood as “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). As I extensively underlined in the previous section of this dissertation (Ch. 1) care and commons are, theoretically, intimately linked concepts (Dengler & Lang, 2021; Federici, 2018;

Zechner, 2021), hence empirically assessing care discourses and practices in urban commons movements is particularly promising.

In both cities, the frame and practice of the urban commons have emerged in the period of, and as a reaction to, austerity policies of the Great Recession; or more specifically, as a social outcome of the movement of the squares and its imaginaries of direct democracy, autonomy and ecologism (Asara, 2020; Varvarousis et al., 2021). While urban commons movements are not confined to Naples and Barcelona, the two cities are largely considered national and European hubs for such kind of movements (Corbisiero, 2021; Mattei, 2013; Pera, 2020; Pera & Bianchi, 2021; Recano & Santi, 2020). Neapolitan and Barcelonian commons movements are, in addition, significantly engaged in those activities that Bosi and Zamponi (2015) group into the comprehensive definition of “direct social actions” (DSAs):

Actions that do not primarily focus upon claiming something or other from the state or other power holders whether this might be seen in revolutionary or reformist terms but that instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself.

DSAs are, in many ways, aimed towards creating bottom-up alternatives to state-led retrenched welfare and capitalist forms of fulfilling needs. In this context, care cuts through many of these initiatives. In both cases, some commons-based political platforms have also emerged and ran in local elections, in what has been often labelled “new municipalism” (Russell, 2019). The latter has also broadly emerged, most prominently in Europe, in the decade following the Great Recession (the 2010s), as a reaction to austerity policies and to the lack of, as Spanish protesters famously put it, “real democracy”, with the aim of fostering a “politics of proximity”. The novelty of new municipalism (with respect to older streams of municipalism) resides in a more radical and politicized orientation towards the state and in imagining institutions working in an urban, and democratized, logics (M. Thompson, 2020). New municipalism’s international vanguard city is commonly identified in Barcelona, which has been administered by the municipalist platform *Barcelona en Comú* (Barcelona In Common) (2015-2023), while Naples is often considered, despite major differences, its Italian counterpart, at least in some phases of the administration by mayor Luigi De Magistris (2011-2021). Intersecting the aims of democratizing politics and socializing the economy, feminist theory is a foundational and distinctive element of new municipalism, especially in Barcelona, where particular emphasis has been given to the concept of the “feministization of politics” (Roth et al., 2020; Roth &

Baird, 2017; M. Thompson, 2020) and where innovative feminist urban policies on care have been implemented (Kussy et al., 2022).

In Naples, multiple interlocutors pointed to l'Asilo as a paradigmatic commons where “care” was explicitly debated as a political concept, and my preliminary fieldwork in the space had confirmed this. In Barcelona, friends and comrades pointed me to Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez for its neighborhood-embedded, contradictory and conflictual, hands-on care ethos. Both projects meet three heuristic principles: sustained activity over 9 years; open-assembly governance; participation largely beyond “professional” activists. A more specific selection rationale is elaborated in Section 5.

The contextual frame shows that both l'Asilo and Àgora occupy nodal positions in their local commons ecologies: each is cited by peers as an experimental hub for (different versions of) “care-based self-management.” Recognizing these positions clarifies why findings from the two sites are analytically significant beyond their immediate boundaries, while the unicity of the cases caution against sweeping generalizations. In sum, the scoping provides just enough breadth to locate the ensuing in-depth ethnographies within a wider Southern-European moment where *care* has become a politicized keyword.

## **5 Case Selection Logic**

### **5.1 Principles Guiding Case Choice**

The research question “*How do commons movements articulate and practice the concept of care?*” calls for information-rich cases where the discursive articulation and the practical translation of care is visible in day-to-day organizing. Despite the sequential design, I did prioritize three considerations from the beginning. First, longevity and stability were essential so that observation would capture routine, not episodic, activity; both spaces have functioned continuously for about a decade at the time of my fieldwork. Second, an open-assembly and horizontal governance structure in order to participate and observe deliberations, contradictions, and conflicts over the issues at stake. Third, questions of care had to be salient, whether openly debated, as at l'Asilo, or more subtly embedded in everyday work, as in Àgora. While here I explain the logic of these choices, I will give more contextual background and specific history and characteristics of these commons in the following chapter (3).

## 5.2 L'Asilo, Naples

In Naples I chose to focus on l'Asilo. At first, I was hoping to be able to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in more than one SMO in Naples. However, once in Naples, by realizing the amount of organizational, cognitive, and emotional work that is required to participate in the life of even just one of these commons, summed with the time and energy needed to critically reflect on and write about them, I decided to place the boundaries of my field where the boundaries of l'Asilo are. These do not necessarily correspond to the walls of the *Ex Asilo Filangieri* building and often include some of those activities that l'Asilo's activists do outside: from formal assemblies of the broader city "Commons Network" to protests, or to the many informal gatherings that happen in squares, bars, restaurants or homes. Among the many urban commons in Naples, I chose l'Asilo for at least six specific reasons.

First, l'Asilo is a paradigmatic case, being the first urban common in Naples to be occupied (or "liberated", as occupations for the commons have been framed in Naples), in 2012, during a national wave of occupations by arts' workers (*Macao* in Milan, *Teatro Valle* in Rome) and a significant discursive moment for the commons, built on the recent struggle against the privatization of water (Micciarelli, 2017). In Naples, L'Asilo's occupation opened the way for the many subsequent ones that happened in the following years, eventually prompting civic-use recognition for seven other spaces (De Tullio, 2018; Vesco & Kioupkiolis, 2022). Second, l'Asilo is among the biggest urban commons in Naples: while others have a more restricted and defined community that inhabit them, or a more circumscribed political or neighborhood identity, l'Asilo seemed to be the most heterogeneous and porous urban commons in town, and as such of greater interest. Third, working as a hub for several other social movements' activities, it is a particularly appropriate ethnographic site, in that it allows to grasp the broader social movements' context. Fourth, signs inside the building explicitly invite visitors to "sognare spazi di cura" (dream caring spaces), and activists debate care, violence and social reproduction as central political questions. Fifth, l'Asilo has a strong presence of activist-researchers, engaged intellectuals and cultural workers in general: this makes some political issues of interest (such as care) be more explicitly and self-reflexively debated than elsewhere. Finally, I had personal contacts with a couple of l'Asilo's activists, which made it easier to get involved in the community and gain trust quicker.

### 5.3 Àgora Juan Andres Benitez

I first visited Àgora several times even before beginning my doctoral studies, and from the outset it struck me as an intriguing site. On one occasion I saw someone tending the plants; when I asked what was happening there, she explained—clearly exhausted—that maintaining a garden commons in the heart of Barcelona’s southern Raval, a neighborhood widely regarded as “difficult,” was no easy task. The challenges were numerous, and her fatigue palpable.

A few years later, after completing fieldwork in Naples, I returned to Barcelona and began exploratory participation in other squatted buildings that, in certain respects, resembled l’Asilo. Some were difficult to access, others stood in districts I scarcely knew, and still others seemed resistant to be open about internal contradictions. I felt continually drawn back to the Raval, the neighborhood I ultimately consider home in Barcelona and, in particular, to Àgora. After attending my first assembly there, any lingering doubt disappeared: provided the activists consented, Àgora was clearly destined to become my second case study, even if my rationale was not yet fully articulated.

The selection of Àgora did not occur in isolation but was shaped by its relationship to l’Asilo and by my own positionality as a researcher. Àgora displayed the three paradigmatic considerations I had already identified (longevity, an open-assembly model, and a pronounced emphasis on care) while simultaneously experiencing tensions, conflicts, and contradictions involving the neighborhood and diverse collectives, dynamics that in many ways revolved around the very question of care. In contrast to l’Asilo, Àgora appeared grounded in quotidian practices of care directed especially toward the surrounding community and its inhabitants. Moreover, the subjects engaged in commoning and caring there differed markedly from those at l’Asilo: activist-researchers and engaged intellectuals were largely absent, whereas poor and racialized neighbors, undocumented migrants, sex workers, drug users, punks, and queer and trans people (often embodying intersecting identities) were consistently present. Levels of self-reflexivity and theorization were conspicuously low; rather than discourse shaping practice, the latter came first, with talk serving only as a corollary.

Although my identity does not align with that of most Àgora participants, I felt more legitimate conducting research in a space located within the neighborhood I know best, where my own life has unfolded, than I would have felt entering an unfamiliar district solely to study a

particular commons. In short, being an actual neighbor enabled me to enter the field as both resident and researcher, rather than merely as the latter.

#### **5.4 Scope limits and analytic transferability**

Drawing on Small's (2009) argument for strategically chosen, information-rich cases, I paired one discursively explicit commons (l'Asilo) with one resource-lean, practice-centered commons (Àgora). Both satisfy the selection criteria and sit within cities regarded as paradigmatic hubs of urban-commons politics, yet diverge in material capacity, participant demographics, and the prominence of care language. Focusing on two well-known commons risks privileging spaces adept at self-representation. However, the resource contrast and inclusion of a case where care remains tacit mitigate this bias. The goal here is analytic transferability, not statistical generalization (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). By generating mid-range concepts, such as *deliberative care infrastructuring*, this study provides insights that can be tested in less visible or differently resourced commons. In sum, the selection of l'Asilo and Àgora follows explicit, theory-informed criteria, reflects pragmatic and ethical considerations, and establishes a two-case militant ethnography capable of probing the many forms through which commons movements articulate and practice care.

### **6 Data Generation Toolbox**

This section explains how I generated the empirical material that underpins the abductive analysis (described in Section 7). Following the logic of militant ethnography outlined earlier, each strategy was chosen not only as a methodological choice but also as a relational practice shaped by field site dynamics. These strategies allowed me to walk the thin line between collaboration and critical distance; each was implemented with attention to ethics, reflexivity, and analytic coherence; and each was deliberately triangulated with others to illuminate both the *articulation* and the *practice* of care.

#### **6.1 Long-Term Participant Observation: Practicing The Everyday**

Participant observation is the core of the ethnographic study. Compared to other in-depth techniques such as interviews, it has exclusive advantages in terms of unveiling what is done regardless of its coherence with what is said, thus revealing the intricate relationship between ideology and practices (Balsiger & Lambelet, 2014). In addition, long-term participation reduces the problem of reactivity; that is, of people behaving differently because they know

they are the object of the study (Bernard, 2011), including the tendency of subjects to give pre-packaged answers drawn from theory rather than from grounded experience. Long-term immersion allows me to examine the everyday negotiations through which care is made political in urban commons movements, in what Melucci calls periods of latency (1996), Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood call “back stage” work in movements (2017, p. 650), and Jasper names “intra-group dynamics” that, despite them being crucial, “are still poorly understood” (2011, p. 295). While anthropology’s classical benchmark of 18 months in a single site still looms large in more traditional ethnographies, I decided to split the total across two sites, each receiving roughly a year-long cycle of field presence. What mattered was not prolonged presence per se, but alignment with the movement’s own temporal rhythms.

In Southern European cities, activist life follows a recognizable cycle: planning resumes in September and winds down by late July before a collective pause in August. By embedding myself in one full cycle per city, I was able to observe how care is articulated and contested through organizational seasons. This design guarded against capturing only momentary impressions or crisis responses, ensuring that data emerged from the steady pulse of collective life. It also allowed for deeper trust-building and fostered the kind of knowledge production that resists formulaic extraction, instead enabling theory to grow from shared cycles of action and reflection. The temporal dimension is most evident in Chapters 5 and 6, where the timing of care-related practices proves critical. Hence, my principal window on care in urban commons movements was a seventeen-month spell of participant observation: ten and seven actual months in each urban commons between October 2021 and July 2023. I spent around two months annually away from the field, mostly to attend seminars and academic duties in Florence. The resulting span was thus shaped by both epistemological and pragmatic considerations.

In l’Asilo (October 2021–July 2022), I embedded myself in the Monday assemblies that, uninterrupted since 2012, function as the community’s beating heart. Beyond assemblies, I immersed myself in the daily life of l’Asilo, being present almost daily. I worked on my writing in the study rooms of its library and participated to virtually all possible meeting and public events (film screenings, theatre plays, concerts, artistic performances, solidarity lunches, book presentations and so on). A fundamental part of it was being present in informal conversations within and beyond l’Asilo: its activists warmly welcomed me as a comrade and friend to dinners, drinks, birthdays, parties, out-of-town excursions. The line between researcher and

friend became thinner and thinner: to this day, many of l'Asilo's activists are personal friends, well beyond the scope of my fieldwork and of this research. In line with my ethical and militant stance, I also engaged in types of care work myself. I actively spent my (salaried) time to do what were known as *accogli* (that is, burdens/favours/support). Opening spaces to guests when needed, welcoming visitors, operating the projector, spilling beers, live translating to and from English when needed, as well as engaging in personal mutual aid even beyond the scope of l'Asilo. I also participated to multiple protest events with l'Asilo activists in Naples and beyond.

In Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez (January 2023–July 2023) the process was similar. I would spend there as many afternoons as I could, although the number of assemblies, public events, and activities was remarkably lower. A lot of times, I would just sit in the shade of a tree with whoever was doing a shift (*permanencia*), smoking a cigarette, chitchatting, asking questions, playing domino, commenting politics or neighborhood stories and dynamics. During assemblies, I often volunteered to take notes. During events, I helped setting up the space before and cleaning up after. Just like in l'Asilo, I engaged with Àgora's comrades in and beyond the space itself, sharing dinners, beers, protests, anti-eviction mobilizations, and events in other neighborhood spaces. In addition, I have often took care of neighborhood kids who spent time in the space, on some occasions taking full responsibility for them when their parents needed some help, or helping organize their birthdays in the space; very special personal relationships were born in this context. I also helped manage social media and email account of Àgora; the latter task continuing to this day. In order to honor my activist commitment, as well as to have practical reasons to spend time in Àgora with neighbors, I co-coordinated a collaborative gardening project, which I detail below (Section 6.5 of this Chapter). Finally, I complemented my militant commitment with a participatory video project (Section 6.4 of this Chapter).

In total, I wrote 105.000 words of fieldwork diary that weave description with reflexive commentary across the two fieldworks (56.000 in l'Asilo, 49.000 in Àgora). Sometimes I used to write notes on my phone during meetings and conversations, which I would later transcribe, expand and elaborate in my digital fieldwork diary the following morning, when most of my writing happened anyway. In addition, as part of my fieldwork, I carefully selected 151.000 words of significant chat conversations in l'Asilo, that I later analyzed. While in l'Asilo's assemblies and chats activists were quite explicit in their politicization of care, in order to

understand in full how activists framed care in their own words, or how they understood its blind spots and controversies, I turned to interviews.

## **6.2 Semi-Structured Interviews: Listening For Articulation**

Understanding the fundamental dynamics, relations, and processes with participant observation helps the researcher understand what the important (research *and* interview) questions are and who to ask them to. Here is when in-depth interviews allow me to have long, structured conversations with social actors, in which I explicitly ask them, among other things, to describe and explain what care is for them and their movements. This is a fundamental step for complementing previously collected information, which might lack structure and completeness (Gerson & Damaske, 2020).

I conducted sixteen long interviews (ten in Naples, six in Barcelona) drawing a maximum-variation sample across gender identities, ages, activist tenure. In my interviewing, I treated respondents as interpretive partners rather than data mines. Conversations lasted from one to two hours, usually in a quiet corner of the commons but occasionally during a slow stroll through surrounding streets. I always began with life-history prompts “How did you first encounter l’Asilo/Àgora?” before nudging toward reflections on care-related politics and episodes: a conflict resolved, a night spent guarding the gate, a moment when someone felt unseen. All audio recordings were transcribed and coded first line-by-line, then in dialogue with fieldnote codes.

Interviews inevitably skew toward articulate insiders; casual garden visitors at Àgora or one-off performers at l’Asilo remained under-represented. To compensate, I recorded informal conversations in fieldnotes and occasionally returned to an interviewee with follow-up questions sparked by new observations. This iterative process embodies the abductive logic described in Section 2.

## **6.3 Participatory Survey In l’Asilo**

The participatory survey emerged as a militant-research device whose first obligation was to the l’Asilo collective. Drafted in open meetings where activists re-phrased their own concerns into questions, it carried a plain-language disclaimer on the opening page: responses would remain anonymous, the findings would be returned to the assembly for discussion, and only thereafter might they contribute to my doctoral work. By sequencing community benefit ahead

of scholarly use, the instrument enacted the feminist principle that data generation should strengthen, rather than extract from, the people who supply it.

Collective authorship shaped the questionnaire's architecture: of its twenty-eight items, eighteen were deliberately left open-ended so respondents could narrate the situated meanings of care, conflict and participation; the remaining closed questions captured only basic descriptors such as frequency of assembly attendance. Once finalized, the survey link and a QR code were circulated through the mailing lists, Telegram chats and posters placed at strategic points in the building, maximizing accessibility without privileging any subgroup. Forty-eight activists completed the survey, a figure that reflected the diversity of involvement across the space: roughly one-sixth never attended assemblies, one-fifth came only a few times a year, and just under two-thirds participated monthly or weekly. The open design generated 864 qualitative written responses, an unusually rich corpus for a survey, which required a considerable amount of time to code, analyze, and synthesize. I imported the material into MAXQDA, where I inductively coded and categorized every open answer. Linking those code families to the few closed variables produced visual summaries (e.g., bar charts paired with anonymized quotations) that could be shared with the community. These slides were presented to the full assembly in late May 2022, allowing members to use the anonymous insights to discuss and transform internal dynamics. In this way the survey completed a reciprocal cycle: conceived collectively, analyzed with my time and skills, and returned to the very people whose reflections had made it possible.<sup>23</sup>

#### **6.4 Participatory Video In Àgora**

Participatory video (PV) is best understood not as a neutral recording device but as a situated social practice that reorders who is allowed to ask questions, frame narratives, and circulate knowledge. By redistributing authorship and analytic control, PV democratizes knowledge production, reinforces collective action through the shared labor of scripting, shooting, and viewing, and refuses extractivist logics of data collection. My main motivation for proposing a PV process in Àgora was therefore political rather than scholarly: to use the privileged time, equipment, and institutional support I benefit from as a university-based researcher to create something with and for the community: something that would matter more to participants than

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<sup>23</sup> A more detailed account of the participatory survey is waived into my ethnographic narrative and argument in Chapter 5.

any academic chapter could. Of course, research insights might (and ultimately did) emerge, but they were always secondary to the goal of producing a collective artefact that strengthened ties among diverse participants, amplified voices, and left a tangible resource in the garden.

These commitments framed the project introduced at the 20 June 2023 assembly of *Àgora*. Together with Lucía Muñoz Sueiro (an engaged anthropologist active in the garden and expert in participatory and visual methods), we presented the project to the assembly. Its members endorsed it and named three intertwined aims: to weave stronger relationships among the many ethnic, linguistic, religious, and political groups that use *Àgora*; to surface what users value in the commons and what unmet needs remain; and to raise broader public awareness of *Àgora*'s history, activities, and voices. Because these objectives emerged from the assembly rather than from outside researchers, the project secured a license to proceed while remaining accountable to the community it sought to document.

Recruitment combined low-tech posters hung inside and outside the garden (see *figure 1*), messages in the Telegram chat, and face-to-face invitations. Initial responses were exuberant: people immediately imagined themselves as actors, singers, or directors and promised to attend the inaugural workshop. We carefully prepared the workshop (held on Sunday, 25 June 2023 at ten in the morning), and waited for people to show up, around tables scattered with butcher paper, markers, and Post-its, printed schemes of the video's phases, from ice-breaker exercises to thematic segments on why *Àgora* matters, how care is practiced there, and what improvements are desired. Yet, to our initial disappointments, only four participants actually showed up, and conversation stalled amid shifting languages, intermittent phone translations, and uneven commitment.



Figure 1: the flyer for the participatory video

Although Lucía and I had studied manuals on how to conduct a “proper” PV process, the garden’s precarious and transient realities quickly unsettled textbook chronology. Many potential collaborators juggle informal work, childcare, or unstable housing, which turned scheduled workshops into recurring introductions rather than a linear progression. Hence, recognizing that declared willingness does not ensure sustained participation, we assumed (as it was strongly suggested to us by historic member of the assembly) a stronger coordinating role: we arranged one-to-one or small-group shoots around participants’ availability, provided on-site interpretation, and scaffolded each conversation with prompts such as “What do you value in Àgora?” and “How do you imagine this commons five years from now?”

Filming began the following evening in the communal kitchen, where the *Fogons Rebels* collective (FR) was preparing the usual Monday dinner with free food that was cooked collectively instead of being thrown away by local shops and supermarkets. To respect the FR policy against showing faces and to ease self-consciousness, we adopted the viewpoint of a stray cat, also an emblem of Raval resistance and an anarchist mascot. The camera prowled table-tops, catching hands chopping vegetables and tattoos sliding past steaming pots, a playful frame that doubled as a privacy shield. The whole video project became the story of a stray cat finding its home in the diverse community of Àgora through discovering its history, characters,

and contradictions. Footage soon included domino games under plane trees, the barber's pop-up salon, and testimonies in Arabic, Punjabi, French, Catalan, and Spanish. Ibrahim, an undocumented migrant, pointed to the fact that it was precisely the hybrid nature of the space (neither a public square nor a private garden, or what the literature would precisely defined as a commons) that made it feel safe for him, while a trans activist called it both an oasis and a mirror of the neighborhood, which she dreamt one day would be safe enough for her to have Tinder dates in it.

A fully participatory editing phase ultimately proved impossible: collective montage sessions never coalesced, so I ended up assembling the rough cut. This, as well as the previous difficulties in gathering people, underlines an improvised, adaptive approach that diverges from the linear PV cycle envisioned in methodological handbooks. The rough cut returned to its sources during *Àgora's* tenth-anniversary celebration in October 2024, projected onto the commons' south wall. Contributors watched their own struggles and joys refracted through the cat's wandering eye. In that gathering the video fulfilled its primary mandate: to place my institutional privilege in the service of collective storytelling and to leave behind a living document that matters more to *Àgora's* commoners than any academic insight I might subsequently carve from the experience. After the screening I received some feedback that I will integrate in a final version on which I will work on as soon as this thesis is submitted.

## **6.5 Collaborative Gardening In Àgora**

The collaborative *huerto* (vegetable garden) emerged out of the same fieldwork serendipity spirit as the video. It was never part of an original research design; it originated instead, once there, from my desire to be practically useful for the community I was working with. From its inception the project was grounded in a feminist-care epistemology: gardening was more a practice of mutual aid and embodied research than it was a way of collecting data, where tending soil and plants became an entry point into the rhythms and relationships that animate the space. I possessed only basic horticultural knowledge, yet several long-time *Àgora* members recalled that over past years different activists had cultivated a modest vegetable patch. On that precedent I floated the idea of reviving it during an early spring assembly, framing the proposal not as a participatory research method but rather than as a collectively owned experiment in human and more-than-human care.

A reconnaissance trip to the Hort Okupat in Gràcia on the 2nd of March revealed both potential and obstacles: I travelled to learn seed-saving and sharing routines with Maryam, only to find Maryam unable to join and workshop hosts more interested in rats management than newcomers' questions. Yet their generous seed packets and tips on co-existing with snails underlined the collective ethos we hoped to nurture. Back in Àgora on 4 March, I arrived in the morning with a well-worn *cuadernito del huerto* (garden notebook) inspired by the Hort Okupat one, printed companion-planting charts and permaculture guides that I had plasticized in order to last. Together, Lucía, Alizée, Azahara and occasional passers-by cleared beds, laid plastic sheeting against nightly chill, and planted tomato seedlings. Emma slipped in to water, and by midday the garden looked remade. This and many others hands-on sessions wove me into the garden's social fabric as a gardener-researcher.

Initial assent was enthusiastic, but the labor that followed was intense: preparing the beds, sourcing seedlings and organizing watering rotas required more hours than anyone had foreseen. Workshops convened with lists of twenty interested people but often only two showed up for daily watering. Whenever the *huerto* team fell behind (when weeds overtook the paths or tomatoes drooped for want of staking) criticism surfaced from other users in assemblies who rightly pointed out that occupying space in the commons entails responsibility.

By mid-April the stakes of this labor became clear when Hajar posted that "*El huerto es compromiso toooooodos los días... si no, las plantas y el curro realizado están en peligro*" ("the garden is a commitment of eeeeevery day... otherwise, plants and previous work are in danger") urging the group to name who would truly water each sunrise. Duties tacitly devolved upon whoever happened to feel most accountable at a given moment; more than once that proved to be me, hose in hand at dusk, giving the soil the deep soak that Barcelona's summer heat demands. This visible labor was itself a form of research that invested time and care into the space.

Far from a tidy case study, the patch became an index of how collective commitment waxes and wanes under precarious conditions. Unexpected incidents further enriched the ethnography: after a late-spring event an animal, or perhaps a curious neighbor, uprooted a tray of seedlings, generating frustration and crossed accusations. At the Children's Day workshop we transplanted sunflowers beside the swings, and many neighbors pitched in, blending skill-share with solidarity.

Methodologically, the *huerto* served as a living audit trail: my handwritten *cuaderno*, plasticized guides, WhatsApp logs and field conversations mapped a terrain of care that transcended traditional interview or observation. Just as with the participatory video, rigid methodological steps yielded to improvisation, shaped by the syncopate rhythms of marginalized urban lives which showed how both difficult and rewarding was for them to care in and for the urban commons. In tending Àgora's soil, I learned to navigate its social soils too.

## 6.6 Keyword Analysis

Finally, I ought to mention that, for chapters 1 and 4, I also researched “care” as a word following quite specific methods. For example, as a preliminary step during the first phase of my research, to trace the presence of “care” I archived activist pamphlets, encampments’ programs, online articles on movement media, manifestos and books. Moreover, thanks to Marco Deseriis’ course at Scuola Normale, built on Raymond Williams’ cultural-materialist method of keyword history, I traced the *longue durée* of the keyword “care” by adopting a mixed-method lexicographical strategy. First, I used the Collins English Dictionary’s frequency tool to chart usage trends over the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, identifying where bursts of interest might be emerging. Second, I turned to the Oxford English Dictionary for first attestations, obsolete senses, and diachronic shifts from Old through Early Modern English. Third, to capture the parallel evolution of Italian *cura*, I interrogated the *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* (GIDLI), mapping its medieval glosses, etymological roots, and transitions into contemporary usage. These digital-corpus and dictionary sources were then enriched by archival consultation at the Accademia della Crusca, where examination of early printed lexicons and manuscript registers provided granular insight into historical definitions and philological debates. This triangulation (frequency metrics, authoritative etymological entries, and hands-on archival research) constitutes the core of my historical methodology for mapping “care” across languages and epochs.<sup>24</sup>

## 7 Data-Analysis Strategy

The final corpus holds approximately 220.000 words of fieldnotes, more than 18 hours of recorded interviews (all transcribed), 864 open responses and 480 closed ones to the survey, 151.000 words of selected significant chat conversations, about 5 hours of unedited video. All

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<sup>24</sup> The results of this research are now presented in the theoretical framework of the thesis.

files reside in encrypted storage in my personal computer, constantly backed up by an external drive. Taken together, these inter-linked bodies of data build a thick evidentiary base from which the analysis unfolded. Analysis began in the field, not at my desk: When do people invoke *cura* in l'Asilo? What's the role of the neighborhood for Àgora's activists? These memos seeded provisional codes that travelled with me into the next week's observations and ultimately into the digital corpus. This constant back-and-forth between provisional concept and fresh data embodies the abductive stance outlined in Section 2. Rather than treating theory as a template or data as brute fact, I iteratively asked which constellation better explained emerging patterns.

All textual materials (fieldnotes, interview transcripts, survey open-responses, workshop dialogues and meeting minutes) were imported into MAXQDA 2022. Data were organized by site (l'Asilo/Àgora), mode (diary, interview, survey) and timestamp. Every text was read inductively. I privileged *in vivo* labels wherever possible, letting participants' own phrasing scaffold the code tree. This first pass produced 2.687 coded segments (see figure 2).<sup>25</sup> In an iterative fashion, I started to group similar codes in bigger groups of codes of the same color. Sub-nodes beneath each parent were compared within and across sites: for example, under *Care dilemmas* the codes *criteria for exclusion* (4 refs) and *relationship with police* (7) diverged sharply between l'Asilo and Àgora, hinting at different boundary-drawing logics explored in Chapter 7. Parent nodes were not collapsed; instead, I traced how they combined into four analytic dimensions introduced in Section 3.

The resulting map retained the ten original parent families (for transparency) while layering interpretive categories that cut across them. These cross-cuts provided the backbone for the comparative chapters. Analytic categories derive from two Southern-European commons; their transferability to, say, Northern-European contexts remain, to be tested (not to mention other world contexts). My insider familiarity with Italian left culture may have heightened sensitivity to *cura* rhetoric while dulling awareness of Catalan nuances. Nevertheless, the multi-layered corpus and iterative abductive approach provide a transparent trail for other researchers to adapt or contest the emergent concepts. In sum, the analysis strategy transforms a heterogeneous corpus into coherent arguments that speak to both theory and practice, fulfilling the methodological promise laid out above.

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<sup>25</sup> In the image, I have blackened some codes or part of codes that need anonymity or express sensible matters.

| Codes                                                                    |     | 2687 |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----|------|
| > Care & Feminism                                                        |     | 139  |
| > Care and morality                                                      |     | 6    |
| > Care as language                                                       |     | 213  |
| > Care as practice                                                       |     | 159  |
| > Care dilemmas                                                          |     | 280  |
| > Importance of neighborhood in Naples and Barcelona                     |     | 30   |
| > Militant ethnography                                                   |     | 14   |
| > Naples' Centro Storico                                                 |     | 44   |
| > Personal reflections                                                   |     | 4    |
| > Autocode - ANY: Care Cura Cuidado Cuidados Caring Cuidar Cuida Cuidaba |     | 458  |
| > Survey                                                                 |     | 1340 |
| > Care dilemmas                                                          | 23  |      |
| Against violence discourse - v. does not enter                           | 2   |      |
| Class (& privilege)                                                      | 22  |      |
| Lumpen proletariat (+)                                                   | 3   |      |
| es demasiado de calle                                                    | 1   |      |
| street pragmatism                                                        | 1   |      |
| class conflict                                                           | 2   |      |
| intersectionality                                                        | 3   |      |
| Commons as mirror of the city                                            | 2   |      |
| Conflicts/Violence in Asilo                                              | 27  |      |
| Communication and toxicity                                               | 3   |      |
| Mental health                                                            | 4   |      |
| l'Asilo's kids                                                           | 27  |      |
| 'Social arts'                                                            | 3   |      |
| Conflicts/violence Agora                                                 | 11  |      |
| Libertarian/Abolitionist approaches                                      | 1   |      |
| Racism                                                                   | 13  |      |
| Tancada                                                                  | 4   |      |
| rumurologia                                                              | 1   |      |
| cultures                                                                 | 1   |      |
| Assembly dynamics                                                        | 9   |      |
| Problematising presence                                                  | 3   |      |
| joyful militancy - celebration                                           | 1   |      |
| Juanito                                                                  | 1   |      |
| manu chao                                                                | 1   |      |
| verticalidad agora                                                       | 1   |      |
| Lack of care                                                             | 31  |      |
| Openness/closeness/exclusion                                             | 22  |      |
| Criteria for exclusion                                                   | 4   |      |
| Lack of security / safety                                                | 13  |      |
| Relationship with police                                                 | 7   |      |
| Structural causes of tensions                                            | 0   |      |
| General down moment for movements                                        | 3   |      |
| Touristification / gentrification (+)                                    | 4   |      |
| Raval                                                                    | 3   |      |
| desokupa                                                                 | 1   |      |
| narcopiso                                                                | 1   |      |
| Drugs                                                                    | 8   |      |
| Importance of neighborhood in Naples and Barce...                        | 3   |      |
| Raval                                                                    | 0   |      |
| leader and carer of Robador and bey...                                   | 14  |      |
| Agora                                                                    | 0   |      |
| Agora's history (+)                                                      | 3   |      |
| Agora's vignette(s) (+)                                                  | 5   |      |
| Memory                                                                   | 1   |      |
| Form of life                                                             | 1   |      |
| Raval pride                                                              | 2   |      |
| radical book shops                                                       | 1   |      |
| Care & Feminism                                                          | 57  |      |
| Accollista anonimo                                                       | 2   |      |
| care & masculinity?                                                      | 8   |      |
| Care conflicts                                                           | 10  |      |
| Care for kids - sharing reproduction                                     | 5   |      |
| Care work                                                                | 11  |      |
| Facilitation for care                                                    | 9   |      |
| Interpersonal care                                                       | 12  |      |
| I don't feel cared for                                                   | 2   |      |
| I feel cared for                                                         | 2   |      |
| Who/how do I care for                                                    | 5   |      |
| Sexism                                                                   | 16  |      |
| Care and morality                                                        | 6   |      |
| Care as language                                                         | 25  |      |
| Care desire                                                              | 2   |      |
| Care evoked                                                              | 106 |      |
| Care for personified space                                               | 4   |      |
| Care gluing everything together                                          | 1   |      |
| Care more present in other movements too                                 | 6   |      |
| Care not that in the centre                                              | 2   |      |
| Care vague/emptied/perversed                                             | 11  |      |
| How care arrived                                                         | 12  |      |
| Care and covid                                                           | 37  |      |
| Care comes from NUDM                                                     | 7   |      |
| Care as practice                                                         | 27  |      |
| Care for plants                                                          | 1   |      |
| Care for the commons                                                     | 30  |      |
| Care for the dead (+)                                                    | 8   |      |
| Care for the neighborhood                                                | 25  |      |
| Care in the process (ex. consensus)                                      | 19  |      |
| Conviviality and Reproduction vs. production                             | 4   |      |
| Economies                                                                | 11  |      |
| Gendered care                                                            | 12  |      |
| Unpaid / paid care                                                       | 5   |      |
| Homeless                                                                 | 2   |      |
| Internal space division                                                  | 3   |      |
| Mutual aid                                                               | 8   |      |
| Specificity of commons (for care)                                        | 1   |      |
| food not bombs                                                           | 1   |      |
| veggie garden                                                            | 2   |      |
| Militant ethnography                                                     | 0   |      |
| Care and the radical intellectual position                               | 10  |      |
| Participatory Video                                                      | 4   |      |
| Naples' Centro Storico                                                   | 1   |      |
| Asilo's history                                                          | 42  |      |
| Care commune                                                             | 1   |      |
| Personal reflections                                                     | 4   |      |
| Autocode - ANY: Care Cura Cuidado Cuidados C...                          | 458 |      |

Figure 2: my codes in MAXQDA (some are hidden for anonymization purposes).

## 8 Ethical Implementation, Reflexive Integrity, and Limitations

This research was not cleared by the university ethics committee as such a procedure was not expected in my institution for PhD students. Hence, I have followed best practices with the guidance of my supervisors (in particular, a course on ethnography and interviewing taught by Andrea Felicetti, my co-supervisor). I have also instructed myself by reading multiple papers on (ethnographic and/or) activist methodologies. And, finally, I have kept discussing ethical issues with all fellow activist/ethnographer colleagues I have encountered on the way, and throughout the whole process I have reflected on maintaining a serious yet adaptable ethics of care, foregrounding responsibility and accountability. Ethical decision-making was therefore treated as an ongoing practice buttressed by continual dialogue with participants, with colleagues, and with myself.

A few more specific points about consent, anonymity, confidentiality, data security. I explained the study's aims and my dual position as researcher-activist at public and well-participated assemblies of both l'Asilo and Àgora, in both cases after a few assemblies attended as listener. Oral consent was recorded at the start of each interview. In a couple cases, participants later reclassified earlier statements as off-record, and the coding was updated accordingly. Safeguarding identities relied on three interlocking layers. First, pseudonymization: every name in notes and transcripts was replaced with others. In this thesis, all activists' and entities' names are anonymized by default, unless otherwise agreed with specific interlocutors (including my cases, l'Asilo and Àgora). Second, secure storage: raw audio, video and text files reside in an encrypted folder on my laptop protected by password. Third, only my supervisors have looked at raw data. A couple examples of mitigation strategies are refraining to report explicitly and analyze in this thesis specific episodes or stories of illegality; the collective ownership of outputs (for example, the plan for the participatory video is to release it under a Creative Commons license held by the collective) ensuring participants retain agency over future circulation.

Grounding the study in a feminist ethics of care means that the *doing* of research must itself model the forms of collective responsibility under investigation. The consent protocol, anonymity safeguards and participatory checks embody the very practices of care, boundary-work and deliberation that the thesis seeks to theorize. In addition, everyday militant participation in each commons was meant to incarnate this ethics. To give a few examples: as anticipated, upon entering l'Asilo I practiced *accogli*, the everyday taking responsibility for

burdens, by arriving early to open the door, set up the projector, translate discussions into English when needed, and generally take care of the practicalities that make a space welcoming. This initial slowness, a deliberate refusal to rush into data extraction, allowed me to live in the neighborhood, cultivate friendships and let fellow activists decide when I would shift from being “just another comrade” to also being a researcher, a positional tension I kept visible throughout.

After the end of my fieldwork I remained accountable to both spaces: maintaining activist and friendship relationships with activists from both commons, organizing a public screening of the co-created video in Àgora and managing its e-mail account, and often returning for assemblies, protests and, crucially, for beers on ordinary evenings. By continuing to “be present” in many different ways, either in person or at a distance, the research relationship persisted, rather than closing with the last day of official fieldwork. In this way, the entire methodological arc sought to materialize a militant and feminist ethnographic ethics of care in practice, aligning as much as possible with the very practices the thesis aims to theorize. In short, the ethical and reflexive architecture described here is aimed at that the knowledge generated is not only methodologically rigorous but also consonant with the values of the commons movements under study.

For what concerns blind spots and limitations. First, as anticipated, my privileged identity (male, white, highly educated) blunts my sensitivity to gendered or racialized dynamics. Reflexive memos, peer debriefs and feedback create mirrors, yet they cannot fully dissolve blind spots. Readers should therefore interpret claims (particularly those regarding internal power dynamics) through the lens of that positional situatedness. Second, fieldwork at l’Asilo coincided with Italy’s fluctuating COVID19 restrictions, while when in Àgora that was already an issue of the past. These temporal contingencies shape what counts as care (e.g., heightened mental-health talk) and may not hold in quieter years. Third, the ethnographic comparison between l’Asilo and Àgora is an uneven one; yet, given the ethnographic nature of this comparison, the validity of it does not depend on the amount of data collected or written text developed, but on the quality and relevance of each case for the (sub-) question at hand.

The methodological framework of this thesis allows findings travel best to contexts that share similar features: self-managed cultural or neighbourhood commons, an explicit or implicit concern with care, and a Southern-European political economy marked by post-austerity municipalism. The more one applies my analysis and concepts to other contexts, the more they

will require recalibration. I will therefore present the conclusions of this thesis as analytically transferable heuristics, not universal laws. Following feminist epistemology, I embrace partiality as a strength: because knowledge is always situated, making the limits explicit allows readers to gauge relevance for their own settings. The layered corpus, abductive logic and reflexive safeguards do not eliminate bias; they render it visible and contestable. In that transparency lies the study's claim to methodological integrity. In brief, the architecture outlined here does not erase limitations but sets them in relief, inviting readers to engage the findings critically and to adapt the emergent concepts to their own care-struggles and commons experiments.

## **Chapter 3**

### **The field(s): a historic contextualization**

#### **1 Introduction**

Naples and Barcelona are cities with long and entangled histories: two Mediterranean metropolises whose fates have crossed in ways both formal and symbolic. From 1442 to 1700, the Aragon Crown bound them together: both serving as capitals of the same confederation (at different times), with political and cultural ties stretching across the sea. They were central nodes in the same imperial constellation. Even after the dissolution of these formal bonds, a faint echo of mutual recognition remains, a sense of Mediterranean parallelism that is more than incidental.

In both cities, the respective national states that came to incorporate them (Italy and Spain) have often been perceived as colonizers, foreign institutions clashing with a cultural and political specificity and autonomy. In their troubled relationship with the state, of course, important differences exist. While in Barcelona the social movements' landscape is often marked by a strong Catalan independentist sentiment, in Naples, while cultural specificity is asserted and celebrated, independentism is extremely marginal if not entirely absent in social movements. However, it could be hypothesized that the paradigmatic role of both cities for what concerns the commons and related imaginaries of autonomy is completely unrelated their history of troubled relationship with state institutions, as the rest of this chapter will suggest.

In fact, Barcelona and Naples are also historically linked by proper revolutionary politics. In this sense, it is worth noting for example that in the late 1860s Giuseppe Fanelli, a Neapolitan anarchist and comrade of Bakunin, was sent from Naples to Barcelona, with the purpose of planting the seeds of anarchism in the Iberian Peninsula. Fanelli's mission laid the foundations for what, as I show below, would become one of Europe's most vibrant anarchist traditions. Raval, the dense Barcelonian neighborhood in which my ethnography takes place, carries this legacy in its very texture: Raval was a cradle of the Spanish working-class movement and retains its anarchist spirit even amid waves of gentrification and repression.

The urban commons at the center of this chapter (l'Asilo in Naples and Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez in Barcelona) are both located in historical and central neighborhoods characterized by

extreme population density and poverty levels. In Barcelona, El Raval (approximately 47,000 residents over 110 hectares, with a density of 43,300 people per km<sup>2</sup>) is part of Ciutat Vella, the “Old City”, and like many Barcelonian neighborhoods, it has clear territorial boundaries and a strong sense of local identity (Barcelona City Council, 2021). Raval has the lowest rent per capita (14.013€) among the districts of Ciutat Vella (16.837€), which has in turn the lowest rent per capita in Barcelona, a 73% below the average (22.994€) (Oficina Municipal de Dades Gerencia Municipal, 2025). In Naples, L’Asilo is located in *quartiere* San Lorenzo (approximately 48,486 residents over 150 hectares, with a density of 32,362 people per km<sup>2</sup>) (*Sicurezza e stato di degrado delle città e delle loro periferie*, 2024). San Lorenzo is the poorest neighborhood of Naples (12.092€), and the latter is the poorest metropolis in Italy (Mazzone, 2023). Here, the sense of neighborhood identity is more diffuse. People virtually never refer to San Lorenzo; rather, they might speak of San Gaetano, a nearby square, or more often of broader Centro Storico.

Yet, the city centers of Naples and Barcelona do not only share a high density of bodies and alleys and high levels of poverty and marginalization in their respective cities, but also of histories of struggle which still resonate today. In these thick urban tapestries, spaces like l’Asilo and Àgora are not sites of care and commoning emerged in a vacuum; instead, they are part of a resistant thread of history made of marginalization, resistance, and imaginative reinvention. As such, it is important to pay attention to this history to fully understand them and understand the legacy they are part of.

## **2 Naples**

### **2.1 Naples and Urban Social Movements**

In Naples, the third-largest city in Italy, a vibrant public life coexists with structural deprivation. Here, internationally celebrated cultural heritage contrasts with persistent infrastructural fragility. With a population exceeding 940,000 residents, the city has long faced high unemployment, political volatility, and a deep-rooted informal economy. For decades, public discourse has framed Naples as a “city in crisis.” A depiction that, while grounded in material conditions, risks obscuring the complexity of its urban dynamics and the vitality of its civic landscape (Dines, 2013). Despite widespread images of marginality and passiveness, Neapolitans have often been protagonists of their own history in defiant and revolutionary

forms. Hence, l'Asilo and commons movement do not emerge in a vacuum, but as part of a dynamic history of which I give a few glimpses in this chapter.

Naples's tradition of grassroots activism can be at least traced to the Masaniello revolt of 1647, when a tax on fruit sparked a city-wide insurrection. For nine months, mobs of the *popolo* (artisan and shopkeeper class) and the plebs united to attack tax collectors and nobles, protesting Spain's heavy fiscal burden and feudal injustices. Led by the fisherman Masaniello, plebeian neighborhood militias briefly seized control of the city, though soon faced repression (Villari, 1993). The pattern of plebeian insurgency followed by elite backlash would recur in Naples' history: also in 1799, local republicans and intellectuals staged a dramatic revolt that briefly toppled Bourbon rule, inspired by the ideals of the French Revolution, which led to the proclamation of the Parthenopean Republic. Although foreign intervention crushed the republic within months, the episode marked an assertion of modern popular sovereignty in Naples, demonstrating an early instance of collective political action from below (Santore, 2001). The Parthenopean Republic inaugurated a legacy of resistance in Neapolitan political culture, which continued throughout centuries. For example, Carbonari leaders and sympathetic army officers led a successful revolution in Naples in 1820. However, this victory was soon nullified by Austrian military intervention, and Ferdinand rescinded the constitution. Subsequent uprisings flickered on: in 1828 and again during the pan-European Revolutions of 1848, Neapolitans rose in revolt. In 1848, King Ferdinand II reluctantly conceded a constitution under pressure, only to launch a bloody counter coup that restored autocracy (Santore, 2001).

After unification (1861), Naples was plagued by deep social inequalities, unemployment, and poor living conditions, fueling the rise of labor and anarchist movements among workers and the urban poor. In the late 1800s, socialist and anarchist organizers found fertile ground in Naples' crowded alleys and factory districts. Anarchists like Errico Malatesta emerged as influential figures, preaching direct action and mutual aid. Famously, during the cholera epidemic of 1884 (which killed thousands in the city) Malatesta and fellow anarchists undertook a mission to care for the sick in Naples, defying both the disease and the state's martial-law restrictions. They established volunteer infirmaries and distributed medicine and food by "forcing the city of Naples to turn over" supplies, all while risking (and losing some of) their own lives. In a manifesto afterward, Malatesta's group declared that "the true cause of cholera is poverty, and the true medicine to prevent its return can be nothing less than social revolution" (CrimethInc Ex-Workers Collective, 2020). This remarkable episode inscribes

l'Asilo's attempts to practice mutual care in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Chapter 5) in a longer history of self-organization to face public health crises in Naples.

During World War II, after fascist rule and intense Allied bombing, Nazi troops marched in during September 1943, sparking the Four Days of Naples revolt. Citizens of every district, including men, women, and teenagers, built barricades, fought street battles, and forced the Germans out before Allied forces arrived. The insurrection lacked formal leaders yet united workers, students, artisans, professionals, and disbanded soldiers across social strata. Women and youths served as scouts, stretcher-bearers, and fighters. Sixty-six hours later the occupiers were gone, and when the Allies entered on 1 October they met a city already liberated by its own courage (Aragno, 2017)

Between 1962 and 1976 Naples experienced a wave of bottom-up experimentation that cut across *baraccati* (slum-dwellers) on the city's post-war fringes, a massified university, and the new industrial belt at Pomigliano d'Arco. Priests first stepped into the vacuum left by clientelist city politics, but soon lay activists and intellectuals (like Goffredo Fofi, Fabrizia Ramondino, and others) pushed the compass outward: from improvised welfare in the shantytowns to radical pedagogies in the *Mensa dei bambini proletari*, from student occupations to shop-floor insurgency at the Alfasud plant, and finally to the creatively militant *Disoccupati Organizzati* who confronted both party machines and union orthodoxies after the 1973 cholera revolt. These "fragile alliances" briefly inscribed excluded residents, such as women, children, under- and unemployed workers, into the city's political life (Rossomando, 2022).

Then, in the 1970s, Naples witnessed an efflorescence of militant grassroots organizing influenced by the national *Autonomia* movement: a network of left-wing collectives emphasizing autonomy from both the state and traditional parties. Neighborhood-based movements became a driving force in the city during this decade, as residents of working-class districts organized to combat the worsening urban crisis of unemployment, inadequate services, and public health emergencies (Bove & Festa, 2022). As urban historian Nick Dines notes, the early 1970s saw "radical neighborhood-based movements" in Naples that organized innovative forms of protest, such as coordinated self-reduction campaigns where residents refused to pay exorbitant utility bills and transit fares (2012). In the wake of a deadly cholera outbreak in 1973 (a grim echo of 1884), these local committees fought for improved sanitary conditions and clean water infrastructure in the hardest-hit quarters (Dines, 2012). Their success in forcing

authorities to invest in modern sewage and water systems underscored a recurring pattern: Naples's grassroots would rise up when the basic welfare of neighborhoods was at stake, pressing the state to deliver on public health and housing. This activism often bypassed official unions or parties, relying instead on informal networks of residents, radical students, and young intellectuals—a hallmark of the Autonomia ethos of direct community action. One lasting legacy of the autonomist era was the creation of self-managed social centers (*centri sociali autogestiti*) in Naples. Following the Autonomia repression, young activists turned to occupying the many disused or derelict buildings around the city, aiming to reclaim urban spaces for community use.

The 23 November 1980 Irpinia earthquake jolted a Naples whose 1960-70s radical scene was already losing momentum, but it briefly revived and redirected activism. Spontaneous *comitati popolari* (“popular committees”), staffed by veterans of groups like the *Disoccupati Organizzati* (“Unemployed Organized”) alongside thousands of outside volunteers, took charge of rescue, food, and tents while denouncing a paralyzed local state (De Vito, 2005). The forced relocation of tens of thousands to prefab estates on the urban rim shifted activism toward issues of transit, services, and environmental risk in new peripheries such as Ponticelli and Scampia. Beginning in the 1980s, deindustrialization undermined the local economy, leading to factory closures and widespread job loss. The tertiary sector failed to absorb this displaced workforce, and informal economic activity became increasingly central to urban survival. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, abandoned factories, warehouses, theaters, and former schools in Naples were squatted and transformed into collective social spaces. Each *centro sociale* hosted a mix of concerts, free classrooms, radical libraries, and assembly rooms for neighborhood meetings: they were community centers outside the control of church or state.

Early initiatives such as Jessica (1977) and Eta Beta (1986) were short-lived but marked the beginning of a cycle of grassroots occupation. But the flagship example was Officina 99, established in the early 1990s in an old industrial garage, it quickly became a nationwide symbol of counter-cultural self-organization and nurtured a vibrant scene of hip-hop, reggae, and political art (the famous Neapolitan rap group 99 Posse formed there), while also hosting labor law clinics and anti-mafia debates. Its longevity and success in engaging working-class youth made Officina 99 emblematic of Naples's social centers (Cavaliere, 2013). By the mid-1990s, other *centri sociali* like DAMM (Diego Armando Maradona Montesanto) and SKA also thrived as hubs of activism and youth culture (Dines, 1999). The autonomist and social center

movements of the 1970s–90s thus represent a key transformation in Neapolitan activism: from mass street protests, many activists shifted toward sustained occupation and self-management of urban commons, laying a foundation for the commons movement of the next decades.

## **2.2 Commons Movements in Naples**

Southern Italy continues to face sharp structural inequalities relative to the north, characterized by lower wages, higher unemployment, less developed welfare systems, and elevated rates of absolute poverty (SVIMEZ, 2020). Naples, in particular, consistently ranks among Italian cities with the poorest quality of life (Il Sole 24 ORE, n.d.). The 2008 global financial crisis deepened these disparities, as austerity policies further eroded welfare and public services (Marra, 2015). Within this context of hardship, Naples became the epicenter of a dynamic urban commons movement, part of the third wave of squatting in Southern Europe described by Piazza and Martínez López (2018). Activists occupied abandoned public buildings, reclaiming and redefining them as commons.

While the commons framework has long-standing legal and cultural roots in Italy, it gained new political momentum through the water-commons mobilization leading to the landmark 2011 national referendum against water privatization (della Porta et al., 2017; Mattei, 2013). Naples quickly emerged as a laboratory for innovative practices of commoning, blending juridical creativity with grassroots activism. A decisive moment came with the election of Luigi de Magistris as mayor in 2011. De Magistris, leveraging popular discontent with traditional governance, adopted the commons agenda explicitly. Appointing renowned commons theorist Ugo Mattei as a municipal advisor, de Magistris guided Naples to become the first major Italian city to fully implement the referendum’s mandate by reorganizing its water utility as a public-commons entity in 2012–2013 (Bianchi, 2022; Gasseau, 2024), although this experience has been considered incomplete and not embodied enough (Geagea & De Tullio, 2024). Signaling further commitment, his administration framed occupied spaces as democratic partners rather than illegal settlements, and later recognized them.

By the mid-2010s, Naples featured over 20 active occupations providing critical services (from cultural events and healthcare to language classes and housing) filling institutional gaps created by austerity. The Ex Asilo Filangieri occupation in 2012 marked a significant turning point. Cultural workers protesting precarity and centralized funding reclaimed this former orphanage, establishing collective governance based on open assemblies and consensus decision-making

(Vesco & Kioupkiolis, 2022). Collaborating with sympathetic officials and jurists, activists developed the innovative legal concept of “urban civic and collective use,” reinterpreting and re-actualizing Italy’s historical notion of civic uses (De Tullio, 2018; Micciarelli, 2014)

Formalized through the 2015 “Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use,” L’Asilo became legally recognized by the municipality as a commons managed directly by its user community without private appropriation or state control (Capone, 2016). This unprecedented acknowledgment institutionalized principles of open access, non-profit usage, antifascism, and collective governance through consensus. The city’s resolutions did not merely legalize the occupation but introduced the novel legal category of “emerging common goods,” explicitly positioning public resources outside the conventional binary of state versus private control (De Tullio, 2018)

Building upon this foundational achievement, Naples expanded the commons framework citywide. In 2016, the municipal government extended civic-use status to seven additional occupations, such as Giardino Liberato di Materdei, Ex OPG “Je so’ pazzo,” and Scugnizzo Liberato. The municipality openly embraced these occupations as opportunities to transform urban governance practices, offering resources and legal recognition while entrusting daily management to open assemblies. Each commons has its own specific vocation and way of governance, yet their communities have worked together to identify principles in common 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” (Velotti et al., 2025, p. 8). Parallely, different political ideologies and practices coexist, both within single urban commons and across the commons network. This “unity in diversity” has been theorized by activists themselves as the *hegemony of non-hegemony* and praised as a promising pluriversal politics by recent scholarly work (Velotti et al., 2025)

These initiatives coalesced into a citywide “Commons Network,” linking local activists to broader municipalist movements, including international exchanges within networks like *Fearless Cities* and the *European Municipalist Network*. As public funding receded, grassroots

volunteers maintained libraries, youth centers, and theatres, creating informal welfare systems that pressured the municipality to meet its responsibilities (Froment, 2016). This dual relationship, simultaneously autonomous and dialogical with municipal institutions, allowed urban commons in Naples to navigate effectively between informality and institutionality. This partnership represented a radical experiment in local democracy, deliberately reimagining governance structures weakened by neoliberal urban policies (Bianchi, 2022). Thousands of residents participated directly in these experiments, experiencing collective decision-making and stewardship practices previously unfamiliar in local governance. This fostered an enduring civic resilience, enabling commons collectives to adapt strategically to shifting political pressures and assert their autonomy when threatened. Scholars now widely reference Naples as an example of radical municipalism and an incipient instance of Murray Bookchin's vision of "face-to-face democracy" (Pinto et al., 2022).

The Neapolitan commons also developed as spaces of resistance against neoliberal urbanism and cognitive capitalism, notably through self-managed cultural production (Borchi, 2018; Riccio, 2018; Sciarelli et al., 2021). Commons in Naples thus represent not just material alternatives to austerity but epistemological ones, fostering inclusive spaces for diverse ways of knowing and creating (Vattimo, 2021). De Tullio (2018) and Cirillo & De Tullio (2021) highlight how these initiatives established new civic epistemologies, challenging hierarchical governance and extractive urban policies.

Scholars also note how Neapolitan commons simultaneously function as sites of social reproduction and political subjectivation (Recano & Santi, 2020). The movement integrates juridical innovation, cultural politics, and democratic practices without erasing local specificities, creating an interconnected political fabric that resonates internationally in urban commons and municipalist debates (Bianchi, 2022; Casillo & Capone, 2022). In Naples, urban commons movements constitute both physical spaces and active political collectives, embodying a dual identity that anchors broader theoretical explorations of care that will be developed in the rest of this thesis.

### **2.3 L'Asilo**

Italy's post-2008 austerity saw deep cuts to arts funding and precarious conditions for cultural workers, sparking the "occupy culture" trend. In Naples, this spirit crystallized around l'Asilo (Ex Asilo Filangieri). In March 2012, a collective of underemployed cultural workers and

activists occupied the monumental building of the former Asilo Filangieri (a 16th-century ex-convent turned city property). That year Naples was to host the ambitious UNESCO Universal Forum of Cultures, and l'Asilo's building had been allocated to a private foundation for forum events. Amidst bureaucratic delays and ballooning costs, activists denounced the Forum as a symbol of top-down mismanagement and "waste of money" that excluded local artists (De Tullio, 2018, p. 301). By seizing l'Asilo, they "attacked a symbol" of inefficient cultural governance, transforming it into an open, self-managed arts and community center (De Tullio, 2018, p. 301). Initially a stance against precarity and elitism in the cultural sector, L'Asilo quickly became a city-wide laboratory in alternative political practice: its open assemblies drew not just artists but diverse residents and activists exploring new forms of participation, merging political and artistic experimentation. The occupiers pointedly stopped calling themselves "occupiers" and embraced the identity of "commoners," signaling a shift from protest to the construction of a shared urban commons (De Tullio, 2018).

L'Asilo now defines itself as a "heterogeneous, changing, supportive and open community of workers in the performing arts, art and culture" involved in a "process of political, artistic and cultural experimentation" (*l'asilo*, n.d.). The building is deployed on three large floors, a garden and a number of terraces. The old cappella has been converted to a cinema, the beautiful canteen in a space for dancing rehearsals, a few rooms are dedicated to various kinds of craftsmanship and art, a few others to a library and study rooms, and a huge theatre was built collectively, completed by a foyer equipped with a bar. These huge premises continuously host a mixture of political, cultural and artistic events, with these categories often overlapping. While l'Asilo's everyday management and politics will mostly emerge throughout the ethnographic accounts which I provide throughout the dissertation, I give here a very concise introduction to the way activists organize. L'Asilo's general assembly happens every Monday since March 2012, as I've heard proudly claiming multiple times. Those assemblies are open to the citizenry (with the only exception of "fascists, sexists and racists") and, at least according to the main narration (a contested one) are the fulcrum of l'Asilo. Each and every proposal, external or internal, must pass by the assembly, which takes decisions by consensus. These and several other collective agreements of this informal community are written in the Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use that was presented to the City Government in order to obtain the latter's recognition (*Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use*, 2015). Some recall the Declaration often, for example in order to support their arguments on how l'Asilo should work, while others like to remind that the Declaration was never intended to work as a law, but

rather as a tool to “hack” the law, one that should be subject to constant scrutinizing, contestation and adaptation.



Figure 3: *l'Asilo from above*

In a typical week at l'Asilo, after a lengthy Monday assembly (usually starting around 19:40, despite the official start time of 19:00, and ending between 23:00 and 24:30), the *tavoli* (i.e. working groups) meet on Tuesday and Wednesday. Although membership in these groups is fluid, during my fieldwork the following groups were active: “performing arts,” “library,” “cinema,” and “infrasonic.” These were respectively responsible for theatrical rehearsals, performances, and residencies; management of the library and study rooms; maintenance of the cinema and scheduling of screenings; and the organization of concerts. A less active group, the “armory,” managed the large workshop for arts and crafts, including woodwork, ceramics, and photography. It was regarded as the most anarchist group in l'Asilo, a reputation signaled by the large circled “A” that begins the hand-crafted A-rmeria sign. These *tavoli* occasionally convene in operational “inter-tables.” On average, approximately 100 people visit l'Asilo each week to meet and work (excluding attendees of public events, which may reach several thousand), yet only about 40 participate regularly in assemblies. The divide between those who

eschew assemblies and the so-called “assembleists” constitutes a major source of tension. Less frequently, two additional working groups meet: “self-government” and “making community.” The former focuses on organizational and political matters of high order to be discussed, whereas the latter addresses care, violence, sexist incidents, vulnerabilities, emotions, and relationships. Another key group is the Communication Team, which produces a weekly newsletter and updates the website and social-media channels. During my fieldwork, several new groups emerged, including the “social arts” working group (dedicated to social activities with neighborhood kids), a non-mixed group<sup>26</sup> for discussing sexism and patriarchy within and beyond the community, an all-male self-consciousness group, as well as a mixed “depatriarchalization” working group. These groups will be discussed in greater detail in empirical chapters. Numerous other ad-hoc groups convene to organize specific projects and events. Each group is complemented by at least one Telegram chat, which runs in parallel to a large general chat of more than 150 members. A mailing list also facilitates more in-depth discussions and circulates external proposals received at l’Asilo’s official email account before they reach the assembly. In practice, email exchanges serve as both preparation and follow-up for topics debated in the assembly. If this description seems overwhelming, it is so in many respects. Taken together, this brief description indicates that l’Asilo is a complex organization, sustained by an intricate web of relationships, groups, and communication channels.

### **3 Barcelona**

#### **3.1 Barcelona and Urban Social Movements**

Barcelona’s tradition of grassroots mobilization emerged in the mid-19th century alongside rapid industrialization. Catalonia was the first Spanish region to undergo a modern industrial revolution, making Barcelona a cradle of early labor organizing. In 1840 Barcelona workers formed Spain’s first trade union, and by 1855 the city was the epicenter of Spain’s first general strike. By the 1860s, overcrowded working-class districts, such as Raval, suffered dire living conditions (disease, child labor, poverty) while a wealthy industrial bourgeoisie prospered. Barcelona hosted Spain’s first Workers’ Congress (1865) and became a stronghold of the International Workingmen’s Association (IWA) in 1870. Anarchist ideas especially took root among Barcelona’s artisans and factory laborers, while Marxist socialism made some inroads

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<sup>26</sup> In this case, “non-mixed” refers to the exclusion of cisgender men. Generally speaking, non-mixed groups aim to gather (only) people experiencing the same axis of oppression to allow their autonomous empowerment and self-organization.

via the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE, founded 1879) and its union, the General Union of Workers (UGT, 1888) (Tuñón de Lara, 1977).

Repression was fierce during the Restoration monarchy (1875–1923). Authorities outlawed the Spanish IWA in 1874, driving anarchists underground. In Barcelona this era saw recurring labor agitation and periodic violence. Notably, the early 1890s witnessed anarchist bomb attacks on symbols of authority (like the Liceu opera house in 1893), followed by mass arrests and torture of suspected anarchists in the infamous Montjuïc trials. By 1900, the city's population swelled with migrant workers, and dense proletarian barrios like Raval became hotbeds of radical culture. Working-class mutual aid societies and *ateneus* (worker-run cultural centers) proliferated: 75 *ateneus* were founded between 1877 and 1914, providing education, libraries, and theaters for the masses. These neighborhood-based institutions wove solidarity into the fabric of daily life and nurtured a proud working-class identity tied to each barrio. In times of unrest, the *ateneus* and other community hubs would rally residents to build barricades or join demonstrations, foreshadowing how neighborhood solidarity would remain a backbone of Barcelona's social movements well into the 20th century (Ealham, 2005).

Anarchist and labor unrest surged between 1902 and 1919, repeatedly paralyzing the city. General strikes in 1902 and 1909 both erupted into street battles with barricades (Ealham, 2005). The Tragic Week of July 1909 began as a strike against the call-up of working-class reservists for Spain's colonial war in Morocco, but escalated into a full-scale urban insurrection. For several days, Barcelona's workers seized control of the streets: they toppled tram lines, erected barricades across the city, and vented their rage at the Church's perceived complicity with the ruling class. Mobs torched approximately 80 churches and convents, reducing the skyline to silhouettes against columns of smoke (Ealham, 2005). This gave Barcelona the nickname of *La Rosa De Foc* (The Rose of Fire), which still thrives in the imaginary of the most radical movements and contemporarily gives the name to the CNT bookstore in Raval.

The National Confederation of Labor (CNT), founded in Barcelona in 1910, that championed anarcho-syndicalism, quickly eclipsed socialist UGT in Catalonia as the voice of the proletariat: Barcelona's workers gravitated to the CNT's militant tactics and its fusion of class struggle with community networks. CNT, a strongly decentralized organization, embedded itself in local cafés, social clubs, and even shared offices with neighborhood associations. It

organized district committees (*comités de barriada*) in each working-class neighborhood, giving the CNT an unparalleled capacity to mobilize. Traditional urban protests like rent strikes and food riots now had a permanent organizational backbone, and the CNT's culture of mutual aid and reciprocity gave it a resilient "web of communal, kinship and reciprocal networks" (Ealham, 2005, p. 37) on which to draw. During the 1910s, Barcelona became *the* center of revolutionary syndicalism in Europe. A landmark victory came with La Canadiense strike of 1919, led by the CNT, a watershed conflict at Barcelona's electric power company. Thanks to this strike Spain became the first country in Europe to institute an eight-hour workday by law (Ealham, 2005). This was a triumph of the Barcelona labor movement: the end of 1919, the CNT's membership in the Barcelona area swelled above 250,000, making it arguably the most unionized city on the continent (Ealham, 2005).

However, elite backlash was swift and brutal. Catalan employers and the military launched the years of *pistolerismo* (1919–1923): an era of assassinations and state terror aimed at decapitating the CNT. Hired gunmen from the reactionary *Sindicato Libre* (a boss-backed "yellow" union) gunned down prominent labor leaders in broad daylight, including charismatic CNT organizer Salvador Seguí ("El Noi del Sucre"), murdered in 1923 in a Raval alley. Despite hundreds of activists killed or imprisoned, the anarcho-syndicalist spirit survived underground. In 1927 the most uncompromising militants created the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), a clandestine network devoted to keeping the CNT on a revolutionary path and preventing reformist tendencies. This CNT–FAI alliance entrenched anarchism as the dominant working-class ideology in Barcelona on the eve of the Republican era (Ealham, 2005).

In 1923, General Primo de Rivera seized power in Spain and established a military dictatorship (1923–1930) that outlawed the CNT, forcing its unions to disband or go into exile. He also banned the Catalan language and national symbols in public life, aiming to quash the "separatist" sentiment. Yet repression only drove resistance into new channels. Many anarchists turned to cultural activities as cover: during the 1920s anarchist ateneus and hiking clubs quietly proliferated, keeping libertarian ideals alive under guise of innocent leisure, and even organized clandestine meetings in remote mountain areas (Ealham, 2005).

The proclamation of the Spanish Second Republic in April 1931 marked a new dawn for social movements in Barcelona. The early Republican years brought a whirlwind of reforms and revived grassroots organizing. Freed from repression, the CNT re-emerged openly, quickly

rebuilding to nearly a million members nationwide (half of them in Catalonia) (Ealham, 2005). After a reactionary victory in Spain's 1933 elections, Madrid suspended Catalan autonomy. In October 1934 President Lluís Companys briefly proclaimed a Catalan state; the army crushed the revolt within hours, and jailed thousands of leftists. Activism went underground until the Popular Front's win in February 1936 restored amnesty and the Generalitat, freeing Companys and reviving reformist hopes. For a few months, a sense of hope pervaded Barcelona's popular classes. It was during this spring in 1936 renaissance that women activists in Barcelona and Madrid founded *Mujeres Libres*, the famous anarchist women's organization (30,000 members by 1938), developing literacy programs, women's health clinics, and job training for women (Kaplan, 1971). Their slogan of ending the "triple enslavement" (of women by ignorance, capitalism, and male domination) reflected a new feminist consciousness germinating in the broader social revolution.

Then came the social revolution. In July 1936, a right-wing military led by Franco attempted to overthrow the Republic. In Barcelona, workers rose *en masse* to defend the city. On July 19-20, 1936, both CNT and UGT militias, armed with weapons from loyal Assault Guards and Civil Guards, defeated General Gode's garrison after pitched battles. Barcelona became one of the world's foremost experiments in worker revolution: in the days and weeks after Franco's revolt was thwarted, effective power in Barcelona shifted to the unions and anti-fascist parties. Spontaneous revolutionary committees sprang up: the large majority factories were seized and collectivized by their workers, urban transport and utilities were run by union committees, and many businesses (hotels, shops, bakeries) were taken over and managed cooperatively (Duran, 2003). The POUM party, formed in 1935 by dissident communists and Catalan Marxists, had a strong base in Catalonia's industrial towns and collaborated with the anarchists in pushing the revolution forward.

For a heady period in late 1936, Barcelona functioned as a libertarian-socialist city. Working-class women experienced unprecedented emancipation: they took on roles as factory managers, militia fighters, and neighborhood organizers. However, the Republican government and the pro-Stalinist PSUC grew increasingly uneasy with the anarchist-POUM-led revolutionary tide, as they feared it undermined the conventional war effort against Franco. In the Barcelona May Days of 1937, street fighting broke out between government/communist forces and anarchist/POUM workers after police tried to seize the CNT-controlled central telephone exchange in Plaça Catalunya. For a week Barcelona was convulsed by fratricidal conflict, as

beautifully depicted by George Orwell (2021 [1938]). The outcome was a defeat for the revolution's left wing: the Republican authorities, reinforced by Soviet-aligned units, reasserted control. The POUM was outlawed, its leader murdered by Soviet agents, and thousands of anarchists were disarmed or pushed out of positions of influence. The final months of the Civil War in Barcelona were marked by scarcity, aerial bombardments by Italian Fascists and German Nazis, and internal demoralization. In January 1939, Franco's armies occupied Barcelona. Hundreds of thousands of Catalans fled north toward France in a tragic exodus. With Franco's victory, the curtain fell on one of the most vibrant chapters of urban social revolution in European history. Yet the social revolution left an indelible mark on Barcelona's social memory. The experience of factory collectivization, neighborhood defense committees, and empowered women's organizations showed a glimpse of a radically egalitarian society and forged bonds among survivors that would endure underground through the dark years to come (Ealham & Richards, 2005).

The Franco dictatorship (1939–1975) ushered in nearly four decades of brutal repression in Barcelona. Franco's regime executed or imprisoned thousands of Republicans and activists, Catalonia's autonomy was abolished and its institutions dissolved, and the new regime imposed a rigid National-Catholic order: all independent unions and political organizations were banned, including the CNT, UGT, and all parties of left or Catalan nationalist orientation. Barcelona, which Francoists reviled as the “red” and “separatist” cancer of Spain, suffered harsh purges. Lluís Companys was captured (with Nazi help), returned to Spain, and executed by firing squad in 1940. Tens of thousands of militants went into exile. The Francoist state enforced a cultural genocide against Catalan identity: the Catalan language, flag, and local traditions were prohibited, deepening the humiliation of a defeated nation (Vilanova, 2017). Yet even in these dire years, resistance flickered. A number of anarchist and communist guerrillas (the *maquis*) waged armed resistance in remote Catalan hills into the 1940s, with a daring incursion from France into northwest Catalonia in 1944 by 2,500 *maquis*, which ultimately failed (Sánchez i Agustí, 2009).

Armed resistance faded after 1950, but Barcelona's streets tested subtler tactics. In 1951 a city-wide refusal to ride trams after a fare hike crippled transport for two weeks, toppled the governor and mayor, and gave residents their first tangible win against Franco. The 1960s *desarrollismo* (developmentalism) wave then pushed rural migrants into hastily built outer barrios that lacked basic infrastructure. Out of this hardship grew the *movimiento vecinal*:

grassroots neighborhood associations that, under the guise of “cultural clubs,” demanded basic services and became hubs of open dissent (De Balanzó & Rodríguez-Planas, 2018). By the early 1970s nearly every working-class district had an neighborhood association, and when 17 of them revitalized the long-moribund FAVB (1972-74) they turned it into a city-wide counter-power linked to the clandestine Assembly of Catalonia. The neighborhood associations blocked road projects, staged rent strikes, and, led often by women, wove mutual aid into daily life. Parallel fronts amplified the pressure: students organized in clandestinity, while the illegal Workers’ Commissions orchestrated wildcat strikes that exposed the regime’s fragile “labor peace.” Jails filled and repression stayed brutal, yet the spread of autonomous committees in factories and neighborhoods proved that collective action, once rooted, could outlast fear. This continuity of grassroots practices, from the ateneus and rent strikes of earlier eras to the housewives’ water protests and bus-route sit-ins of the 1970s underscores how deeply the ethos of local mutual aid and direct action had embedded itself in Barcelona’s working-class culture. Yet repression remained severe, political prisoners filled Barcelona’s Model Prison, and some (like the young anarchist Salvador Puig Antich) were garroted as late as the mid-70s (Bravo, 2014).

The Catalan cultural revival was another crucial facet of opposition. Under Franco, open Catalanist agitation was treasonous, but Catalan language and identity survived in private life and the arts. Groups like Òmnium Cultural (1961) taught banned language classes, and public acts of defiance, like in Palau de la Música in 1960, signaled rising confidence. In 1971 the clandestine Assembly of Catalonia united communists, socialists, nationalists, feminists, and progressive Catholics behind the slogan “Liberty, Amnesty, Statute of Autonomy,” linking grassroots social struggles to democratic and national rights (Miller & Miller, 1996).

After Franco’s death in November 1975, the democratic transition saw continuity of the earlier movements even as they transformed in a new political context. In 1976–77, the city’s streets were once again filled with massive demonstrations reminiscent of the Republic days. One of the most momentous was on September 11, 1977 (Catalonia’s National Day), when over a million people peacefully marched in Barcelona calling for restoration of Catalan autonomy. It was one of the largest mobilizations in Europe up to that time (Humlebæk & Hau, 2020). Many older participants had been young in the 1930s, and they now mingled with a new generation of activists who cut their teeth in the final Franco years. Meanwhile, neighborhood associations continued to assert influence in the transition period, negotiating with the new democratic city

council for urban improvements (De Balanzó & Rodríguez-Planas, 2018). Women's activism blossomed openly: in 1976 Barcelona hosted the *Jornades Catalanes de la Dona* (Catalan Women's Conferences), where former underground feminists and younger women gathered by the thousands to press for equal rights, birth control, and an end to the old Franco-era patriarchal laws (Nash, 2018).

At the same time, Catalonia's deep anarchist and anti-authoritarian traditions began to resurface in youth counterculture, workers' collectives, and self-managed community spaces. Early occupations in the late 1970s were often community-driven: for example, in 1977 residents in Nou Barris (a working-class district) took over an abandoned asphalt plant. They gradually transformed it into the *Ateneu Popular de Nou Barris*, a still active cultural center offering workshops and theatre. Ateneus started to re-appear (either historical or new) and functioned as "people's universities," hosting libraries, political discussions, concerts, and skill-sharing workshops in the spirit of popular education, helping revive a collective identity rooted in radical politics and antifascism and inspiring a new generation of self-organized youth.

In a context marked by vibrant social movements but also rising rents and urban redevelopment, the Barcelona's squatting (*okupación*) movement slowly took shape (Cattaneo & Tudela, 2014). By the mid-1980s, squatting for housing had also begun in earnest. These early housing squats were more survival-driven, but they carried a political message: denouncing urban speculation and asserting that vacant buildings in a city with housing scarcity should serve the community. Over time, the focus of the movement broadened. While *okupación* of living spaces continued, activists increasingly created *Centros Sociales Okupados y Autogestionados* (CSOAs): squatted social centers that deemphasized housing in favor of political and cultural activities (Tutor Anton, 2020). Activists opened the spaces to the public as hubs for counterculture, workshops, concerts, free meals, infoshops, and assemblies. The *okupa* movement's ethos of horizontal self-management and shared resources often echoed the practices of early 20th-century anarchist ateneus.

As squats spread, the Socialist-led city council and police occasionally cracked down. Tensions culminated with Spain's 1995 reform of the Penal Code, which for the first time criminalized squatting. Barcelona's authorities adopted a dual approach: negotiation and repression. In a few cases, they quietly tolerated or even negotiated with squatters, especially if a social center had strong neighborhood support. But more often, they pursued evictions through court orders.

A turning point came in 1996 when the Cine Princesa, a former cinema turned vibrant CSOA, was stormed by police in a brutal predawn eviction in October 1996. The operation, met with fierce resistance and street clashes, shocked public opinion and galvanized support for squatters. Ironically, instead of quelling the movement, the repression became an undeniable catalyst that raised the okupas' profile (Cattaneo & Tudela, 2014). After the Princesa raid and the new anti-squat law, squatting in Barcelona exploded rather than disappeared. In 1996–1998 dozens of new buildings were occupied within months. In December 1996, activists even occupied an old farmhouse on the city's rural fringe (Kan Pasqual), pioneering a form of *rurban* squatting that blended urban and communal agrarian lifestyles (Cattaneo & Gavalda, 2010). The number of squatted spaces in Catalonia jumped from around 40 to 150 between 1996 and 1998, with the vast majority in Barcelona (Garcia et al., 2002).

Contemporarily, an explicitly feminist current gained visibility. Women activists in the squat scene, long battling machismo on the left, formed the *Coordinadora Feminista Autònoma* in these years. They asserted the principle that “the personal is political” within squats and carved out safer spaces for women and LGBTQ+ folks. Social centers increasingly hosted feminist workshops, self-defense classes, and women's collectives, and women within the okupa scene challenged its male dominance, asserting feminist praxis (e.g. consensus decision-making, care work valorization, and bodily autonomy) in daily squat life (Tutor Anton, 2020). Consequently, many social centers instituted norms against sexist and homophobic behavior, and some organized women-only nights or queer cabarets.

Also, in the 2000s and 2010s, as Barcelona became a hub for migrant communities (from Latin America, North Africa, South Asia), some squats evolved into sanctuaries and resource centers for undocumented people. Several occupied warehouses in the city's industrial periphery have been used as housing by migrant worker communities. Activists from CSOAs have supported these efforts by improving habitability and mediating with authorities. Moreover, social centers have routinely offered free services that the most precarious workers (often immigrants) need: language classes, legal advice clinics, community kitchens and childcare. Anarcho-sindicalist unions like the CNT and CGT, active in Barcelona, have collaborated with squats, holding assemblies in the spaces or joining forces during general strikes. This underscores an ideological continuity: both movements emphasize direct action and mutual aid over bureaucratic politics, making squatted social centers natural meeting points for radical labor organizing. Overall, this coalition of struggles (feminist, migrant, labor) shows how, in

Barcelona's case, the autonomous social centers acted as incubators for intersectional activism, uniting housing, labor, migrant, feminist, and anti-fascist causes under the shared principle of community self-organization.

Barcelona's squatters entered the 2000s in a position of relative strength, and this period is often described as a golden age for the city's autonomous social centers. The turn of the millennium saw Barcelona's squat movement intersect with broader global struggles. As neoliberal globalization met rising opposition worldwide, many CSOA activists in Barcelona mobilized for large protest mobilizations, often using social centers as convergence spaces. They also rallied against the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and coordinated direct actions during Barcelona's own 2004 Universal Forum of Cultures, which squatters denounced as a corporate-driven city branding exercise. Interestingly, this was the same event which was meant to take place in Naples in l'Asilo some years later and that led to its occupation as a form of contestation. In these mass protests, squatters often provided the radical edge and logistical backbone (medic teams, street kitchens, sleeping spaces for out-of-town activists). By 2006, the pressures were mounting: a city ordinance on civility (*Ordenança de Civisme*) clamped down on various "anti-social" behaviors (street drinking, graffiti, etc.) and was widely seen as targeting the counterculture associated with squats (Debelle et al., 2018). The real estate market was heating up rapidly as Spain's property bubble grew, meaning owners became less tolerant of occupiers. Indeed, speculation was pricing locals out of many neighborhoods, which planted seeds of future anti-gentrification fights. The squatters, for their part, adapted by forging stronger alliances with tenant movements and sharpening their critique of urban capitalism.

The global financial crisis of 2008 and its aftermath profoundly altered Barcelona's social movement landscape. When Spain's property bubble burst, thousands of families in Barcelona lost homes to bank foreclosures, and unemployment soared. By 2011, over 50% of young adults in Spain still lived with their parents due to unaffordable housing, even as some 3.5 million homes sat empty nationwide (González, 2018). In response, a new wave of activism arose around the right to housing, notably the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (PAH) founded in Barcelona in 2009 with an assembly in *Casa de la Solidaritat*, in Raval (Santos, 2024).<sup>27</sup> Drawing on squatter tactics, the PAH blocked more than 2,000 evictions between 2009

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<sup>27</sup> Casa de la Solidaritat is still a fundamental social movement infrastructure for the Raval's neighbourhood. Among other things, it hosts the assemblies of the Old City Housing Union (SHCV) since the recent eviction of *Antiga Massana*, as well as the organic food consumer coop Coopxino, of which I am an active member.

and 2017, and rehoused families by occupying bank-owned flats. Avoiding the loaded term *okupa*, the platform reframed squatting as a public-interest tool, casting housing as a human right and winning broad, even middle-class, backing. This created a productive, if uneasy, synergy with the anarchic squatter scene: veterans lent skills and spaces; PAH's institutional lobbying tempered, but also mainstreamed, the ethos of taking empty property for social use.

In May 2011 the 15M/Indignados uprising filled Barcelona's *Plaça de Catalunya*, thousands protesting austerity and corruption. Its horizontal, assembly-run camp leaned on the city's social center network, with squatters supplying sound systems, generators and organizational know-how. When police cleared the square, the energy spilled into neighborhood assemblies and a wave of new occupations. Through the early 2010s squatted centers became hubs for emerging causes—from migrant-solidarity networks to feminist and LGBTQ groups—tying the *okupa* scene to wider social-justice struggles. Many offered free Spanish or Catalan classes, ran food-distribution points or hosted migrant-worker meetings. They also lent space to feminist organizers planning International Women's Day strikes, all in autonomous, non-corporate settings that embodied the squatters' principle that everyday life and political conflict belong under the same roof (Tutor Anton, 2020).

In May 2014 Barcelona's council under conservative mayor Xavier Trias sent police and bulldozers to evict and raze *Can Vies*, a self-managed center occupied since 1997. The move lit a fuse: neighbors and activists barricaded the streets of Sants, torched the excavator, and nightly clashes spread to other districts and Catalan towns. Dubbed the "Can Vies effect," the revolt channeled pent-up anger over austerity, gentrification and police abuses. After a week during which the regional police chief quit amid criticism of brutality, the city halted demolition: the collective re-entered the half-wrecked building and, through crowdfunding and volunteer labor, rebuilt it. The episode proved that a neighborhood-rooted squat could defeat City Hall and highlighted how *okupas'* fights were also fights against profit-driven redevelopment in areas already squeezed by rising rents. The following year, 2015, brought a dramatic shift in the political opportunity structure. Former housing activist Ada Colau, the public face of the PAH, was elected Mayor of Barcelona on a platform of fighting evictions and reclaiming the city for its people. Her administration (2015-2023) became a reference point for what became known as new municipalism, that in De Magistris' Naples found its major Italian counterpart, as I described with more detail in section 4 and 5 of Chapter 2.

### 3.2 El Raval

“Raval” comes from the Arabic word for an area outside the walls. In medieval times the name referred to the land currently between Montjuïc and the Rambla (where the city walls were at the time). Everything forbidden inside the walls happened here: gambling, unregulated prostitution, smuggling, and the gathering of people who scraped by and looked for work or charity at the city gates. In modern times local residents spoke of “District V,” though most of outsiders knew it as “Barrio Chino,” a label that both exoticized and stigmatized the area, until in the 1980s “Raval” was recovered by the city administration in an effort to rebrand the neighborhood out of stigmatization. The area has long held a dual reputation: as a breeding ground for working-class resistance and as a zone of vice, poverty, and social control (Rius-Ulldemolins & Klein, 2022). Municipal chronicles trace street prostitution here as early as 1339, foreshadowing a centuries-long coupling of sexual commerce and urban stigma (Fernández González, 2014). The latter dates back at least to the eighteenth century, when officials cast the *barri* as an “internal enemy” requiring moral and hygienic “sanitation” (Fernández González, 2022; McDonogh, 1987).

El Raval became a hub of industrial activity in the nineteenth century, housing factories, boarding houses, and a growing proletariat that would eventually play a key role in the Spanish labor and anarchist movements. In fact, the ever first recorded workers’ mobilization in Spain happened in Raval itself, with the burning of the Bonaplata Factory in 1835. In 1850 there were 74 factories only in Raval, that became “the epicenter of the revolutionary workers’ movement” in Spain (Assemblea del Raval, 2020). In Raval, early anarchist militants like Teresa Claramunt, a Catalan textile worker, linked class struggle with women’s emancipation. In 1892 Claramunt co-founded Spain’s first feminist society, the Autonomous Society of Women of Barcelona, articulated around anarchist and republican free-thinking. During those years, Teresa Claramunt lived in Carrer de l’Aurora, 19, the very same street where Juan Andrés Benítez will be assassinated in 2013, and precisely in front of where today is located Àgora’s entrance. The CNT also found fertile ground here, while the neighborhood’s social clubs and cafés buzzed with revolutionary discourse (Fernández González, 2016) and libertarian presses such as *El Productor*, *Tierra y Libertad*, *Solidaridad Obrera* and *Acracia* operated here (Siles, 2015). This reputation as a red and black neighborhood continued through the Civil War and beyond, cementing Raval’s place in the symbolic geography of leftist struggle.

In Raval working-class mobilization coexisted with poverty, crime, marginality and sex work. Historian Temma Kaplan notes how thin the line was between sex work and factory work for women in early-20th-century Barcelona: domestic servants in wealthy homes were frequently raped, pregnancy meant dismissal, and sex work was often the only option. Widows, single mothers and many others faced the same fate. Bars, brothels, cabarets, theatres and late-night haunts multiplied, giving the quarter its journalistic exoticist nickname “Barrio Chino” in the late 1920s (Kaplan, 1993). Over time, media narratives, urban policy, and middle-class imaginaries converged to cast it as a place of degradation, a process that intensified during the late Franco period and accelerated under democracy. In the late twentieth century, the neighborhood’s aging infrastructure and growing immigrant population became excuses for aggressive urban interventions that were legitimized through a civilizing discourse of regeneration, culminating in major public works projects such as the opening of the MACBA (Museum of Contemporary Art) and the urban renewal plans associated with the 1992 Olympics. The flagship Rambla del Raval, inaugurated in the year 2000, required the demolition of nearly 3,000 dwellings (of working-class tenants who were evicted without any compensation) and was heralded as a model of design-led renewal (Degen, 2018).

Rius-Ulldemolins and Klein (2022) argue that Raval’s shift from a stigmatized slum to a terrain of speculative investment involved a carefully managed rebranding of the area’s identity: the “Barcelona Model” of urban governance, lauded internationally for its combination of design, tourism, and social cohesion, masked underlying processes of displacement and dispossession. In this process, public space was redesigned for new consumers such as tourists, students, and cultural elites. But gentrification was never fully completed. Luxury hotels and Airbnb flats now stand cheek-by-jowl with run-down rentals and squatted community spaces, illustrating an ongoing tension “between survivability and togetherness” in the neighborhood’s social fabric (Kotsila et al., 2025, p. 2).

One of the most emblematic battlegrounds in the ongoing struggle has been Carrer Robadors, which, alongside Plaça Salvador Seguí, has served as both a symbolic and physical site of contestation: here, the presence of street-based sex workers, many of them migrant women, has drawn particular ire from city authorities, media outlets, and neighborhood associations aligned with gentrification agendas (Clua, 2021). These women have been central to the articulation of a counter-narrative that challenges dominant framings of order, safety, and morality: Lazzarino

(2024) explains how the collective *Putas Indignadas*<sup>28</sup> transformed nearby squats such as Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez into “acts of citizenship,” forging alliances with tenants’ groups while contesting ongoing criminalization. However, the containment of sex work from public space has been pushed for in different ways and justified through a civic moralism that conflates prostitution with criminality and urban decline (Fernández, 2012; Sirvent & Carreras, 2012). Contemporarily, in Raval more than six in ten inhabitants were born outside Spain, and five are officially registered as foreign nationals, predominantly from Pakistan, the Philippines, Bangladesh, and various South American countries, making it the most ethnically diverse neighborhood in Barcelona. The district’s average disposable income sits 43 % below the citywide figure (Oficina Municipal de Dades Gerencia Municipal, 2025).

Today, with two anarchist bookshops (and community centers), two popular ateneus<sup>29</sup>, a big squatted social center,<sup>30</sup> a popular gym, a migrants community center, and the squatted garden of Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez, all concentrated in just a few square kilometers, the neighborhood remains a crucible of grassroots organization. Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez, to which I turn in the next and final section, cannot be understood in isolation from a neighborhood where revolutionary pasts and precarious presents collide and where dispossession coexists with community-making. The space emerges not as an anomaly but as part of a living tradition of insurgent urbanism.

### 3.3 Àgora Juan Andrès Benítez

Àgora is one of the key sites through which collective forms of care, resistance, and spatial politics are enacted in Raval and Barcelona. Drawing on informal conversations during fieldwork, as well as literature reviews, here I briefly trace the origins and transformations of this urban commons.

On October 5, 2013, Juan Andrès Benítez, a gay neighbor and shop owner was violently assassinated by officers of the Mossos d’Esquadra in Carrer Aurora, just below his apartment. Multiple neighbors, observing from their windows, filmed the intervention: footage later

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<sup>28</sup> *Putas Indignadas* will be used interchangeably with *Putas Libertarias del Raval* in this thesis, given they mostly coincide, but the first name is mostly used to interact with institutions, whereas the second is employed for more political purposes.

<sup>29</sup> *Ateneu Enciclopedic Popular* and *Ateneu del Raval*.

<sup>30</sup> *Antiga Massana* was then evicted in 2025 by the current city government of the Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC), which has intensified neoliberal and law-and-order policies after the times of relative dialogue with Colau’s government.

circulated widely, showing officers kneeling on Benítez, striking him with punches and kicks while compressing his neck and back, ultimately triggering cardiac arrest. He died shortly afterward in police custody. The autopsy recorded cranial poly-trauma consistent with homicide and ruled out natural causes. After the assault, several officers tried to delete video footage captured by neighbors, wiped blood from the pavement and described the death as “sudden.” Catalonia’s interior leadership publicly endorsed the action, calling it “technically correct” and denying any police excess. But the public dissemination of the neighbors’ footage provoked significant outrage across the city and country. Summed with neighbor pressure, the video evidence led the investigating judge to charge the eight officers with homicide, torture and obstruction of justice.

From the outset, the platform “Justícia Juan Andrés” organized the popular prosecution alongside the family, united dozens of social groups, and waged a sustained truth-and-justice campaign through protests, press conferences and close monitoring of the legal process. This coalition included residents, activist collectives, and affected communities, including Putas Indignadas. For the first time, sex workers collectively entered the neighborhood’s political arena as public actors, politicizing their own experiences of surveillance, criminalization, and police violence.

On October 5, 2014, exactly one year after Juan Andrés’s death, neighbors occupied a vacant plot of land directly across from the site of the killing. Abandoned since 2009 and owned by a bank, the lot was transformed into a green, open-air space and was named Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez. From its inception, Àgora was framed as a space for collective memory, apoyo mutuo (mutual aid), and community resistance. A large mural at the entrance (figure 1) articulates the space’s foundational values: remembrance of Juan Andrés, critique of police brutality and real estate speculation, and an explicit commitment to self-management, anti-capitalism, and

inclusion. The mural also sets the boundaries (as I will show in Chapter 7), rejecting all forms of violence, racism, and machismo, and affirming the space as open to all who share its values.



Figure 4: Mural at the entrance of Àgora Juan Andrés Benítez, detailing the origins and principles of the space (photo by author).

For what concerns the campaign, the public prosecutor supported a jury trial, but just days before it began (in 2016) the private accusations and the defense reached a plea agreement: the charge was reduced to negligent homicide, the sentence set at two years (avoiding prison) and compensation fixed at €150,000. Although the ruling kept the officers temporarily suspended, the deal quashed any public trial that might have scrutinized the full extent of police violence. Hence, after the plea deal, the platform issued the manifesto *Més unides que mai* (“more united than ever”), denouncing impunity and demanding the officers’ permanent expulsion from the force. In its early years, Àgora operated as an extension of the justice campaign: a space of political assembly, commemoration, and mobilization. It hosted neighborhood meetings, press conferences, and direct actions. Over time, however, its role evolved. While still connected to broader activist networks, the space increasingly became a site for everyday forms of radical care, including food distributions, informal support networks, and social gatherings, especially for those most marginalized by the formal city.

Àgora is managed through open weekly assemblies based on principles of self-management (*autogestió*). A core group of highly engaged residents assume responsibilities for maintenance, coordination, and conflict mediation. This informal governance structure produces a kind of horizontal hierarchy: participation and care for the space, rather than professional or social status, determine influence. Most users of the garden engage it passively, as a space of rest, socialization, or quiet refuge. Many are undocumented, unhoused, racialized, queer, trans, or otherwise marked by socio-legal exclusion, for whom Àgora provides an alternative to hostile public space and punitive social services.

In 2021, internal tensions culminated in a conflict over rules and conduct: a crisis assembly was convened, and members voted to formally entrust the management of the space to the Putas Indignadas, acknowledging their years of sustained commitment and practical care for the neighborhood. Shortly thereafter, members of the collective were physically assaulted by a former participant they had previously expelled for repeated violence. The ensuing legal proceedings were unusual: not only did the court rule in favor of the sex worker collective, but it publicly recognized them as “neighbors” engaged in community work, an affirmation rarely extended to criminalized populations, hence echoing the legitimacy they had already built through everyday care for and within the space. By the end of 2023, however, the Putas Indignadas collectively withdrew from the formal management of Àgora. Tensions had developed with staff from a social cooperative that used the garden for shared meals involving women who use drugs. Many of the women were also sex workers and part of the same mutual aid networks. To avoid compromising the principles of self-management and mutual recognition that underpinned their involvement, the collective chose to step back, but one member, María, continued her engagement as an individual neighbor (Lazzarino, 2024).

In Àgora, there is a critical focus on caring for the memory of people who have passed away. Firstly, this has obviously to do with the very name of Àgora, that is dedicated to the memory of a neighbor as a victim of state’s brutality. The connection to Juan Andrés is more than symbolic. In an interview, I asked Juan, one of the most historic activists what motivated him every day to come all the way to Àgora from the pretty far neighborhood where he lived. His answer was unhesitant: “what motivates me is Juan Andrés. I come here to take care of the memory of Juan Andrés.” Juan was taking this literally, and often would dedicate hours to refresh the colors of the many graffiti painted on the inside and outside sides of the perimeter wall of Àgora. On the outside wall, graffiti reproduced the assassination of Juan Andrés and

the neighborhood resistances against police brutality. This was Àgora's public presentation to the rest of the city, and even to tourist guided tours that would pass daily by Aurora Street to sell the "authenticity" the neighborhood. Facing the inside of Àgora graffiti were mostly dedicated to other state victims in Barcelona as around the world. The biggest graffiti, on the blind wall of an adjacent building, was a homage to the 43 Mexican students assassinated in the 2014 Ayotzinapa (Iguala) mass murder. Smaller ones, on the inside side of the walls, are dedicated to Juan Alvarez, to the memory of sex workers and to others. Big international events with Quintana Río, or with the parents of Carlo Giuliani, were held in the space. Many of the public events held in the space were book presentations of the libertarian bookshop and publisher El Lokal, located a minute away from Àgora, often dedicated to the memory of otherwise-forgotten common inhabitants and militants from the neighborhood. The biggest assembly I assisted to in Àgora was for the organization of a memorial day after the pass away of Llum Ventura, an anarcho-feminist local activist who had died at old age. In sum, caring activities in Àgora were not only in the present nor only for the living, but also with a look to the past, for the memory of the dead. Today, Àgora remains not only a community garden but a living archive of struggle and care, where marginalized residents reshape urban space through collective practices of memory, survival, and resistance.

## Chapter 4

### The political language of “care”

#### 1. Introduction

What sparked my interest in writing this chapter was the explosion in usage of the term “cura” (Italian for “care” and “cure”) by left-wing movements in Italy during the Covid-19 pandemic. I found it fascinating to explore how and why this term became an important political word for specific actors at a particular time. Surely, in pandemic times “cura” gained prominence beyond Italian left-wing movements: a large variety of actors mobilized it, internationally and across the social and political spectrum. Intuitively, this was because amid a global pandemic care (and cure, for the Italian case) were understandably perceived as most necessary. Chatzidakis et al. (2020) wrote about the “discursive explosion of care during Covid-19,” with care being “the buzzword of the moment, its meanings draining away in its constant evocation” (p. 889). In their article, they showed corporations’ attempts to describe themselves as “caring,” or even extreme-right leaders like Trump and Bolsonaro proposing reactionary models of “care.” However, capitalist calls for caring have been pervasive since before the pandemic, ranging from the advertising of environmentally friendly products, where businesses aim to prove how much they care, to the purchase of recycled goods, which enables consumers to exhibit collective care (Goodman, 2013; Goodman & Boyd, 2011). Yet, in pandemic times, my suspicion was that within left-wing social movements, “care” was not just a buzzword but a deeper shift in political priorities.

This suspicion was built on a few observations that I was making in the first few months of my PhD. For example, during that time, I followed a few online meetings of the *Società della Cura* (“Care Society”).<sup>31</sup> In one, I was struck by the statement made by a prominent activist:

It is since the alter-globalization movement that we know what we are up against, but we are not able to give a name to what we are struggling for. Now, after more than 20 years, we have found a way to call it: “care” is a term and framework on which we all agree despite our differences.

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<sup>31</sup> As I mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, this was a wide coalition of SMOs that was formed in Italy during the pandemic.

Such a statement gave me a glimpse of the fact that, indeed, the importance of “care” for left-wing movements was to be researched beyond a mere good-sounding word in pandemic times. Something deeper was happening. As noted by Charles Tilly in *Contentious Performances*, language is not just a byproduct but is deeply intertwined with the dynamics of social and political change (2008). For example, as I will detail in this chapter, the diffusion of “care” within left-wing movements was not just a consequence of the pandemic, but had also to do with feminism: some feminist activists and intellectuals were the first ones to politicize “care” back in the 1970s, and have done ever since (Federici, 2020). Now, if one tries to look at the five years preceding the publication of this thesis, it is virtually impossible to recount the amount of academic and non-academic books, articles, special issues, blog posts, conferences, festivals, events, discussions, and webinars, between academia and social movements, that had the word “care” in their titles and were framed around the concept. To get an idea of the academic side, the reader can refer to the theoretical framework of this thesis. For what concerns left-wing movements, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to make an overview, but care was everywhere, and was a core concept in feminist manifestos such as *Feminism for the 99%* (Fraser, Bhattacharya, and Aruzza 2019) and *Life Beyond the Pandemic*, written by the Italian transfeminist movement *Non Una Di Meno* Roma (2020)—and the publication of popular books such as *The Care Manifesto* (2020) had a resonance that can hardly be overestimated.

On a first analytical level, then, an explosion in the use of a word has been taking place, particularly by grassroots left-wing actors. Care as a political word is the analytical object of this chapter. More broadly, the chapter is about the political language of care. I investigate how care language diffused, how activists integrated “care” into their vocabulary, what it meant to them, and what tensions it produced. To do this, I shed light on *l’Asilo*, the Neapolitan urban commons that I introduced in earlier chapters. Daniel Rodgers, in his book on contested keywords in American politics (1998), argues that “we need to combine attention both to the meaning of words and to the strategic situations in which word workers find themselves when they employ them: to the actual work that words do in specific contexts” (p. 5). This is precisely what I aim to do in this chapter, with the focus on “care.” Sidney Tarrow, in his book on contentious language (2013), follows Rodgers in arguing that “we must combine an ethnographic attention to the settings in which new contentious terms are invented with longer-term and comparative analyses of where they diffuse to and how well they endure” (p. 21). While “care” was obviously not invented in *l’Asilo*, this chapter pays ethnographic attention

to the trajectory of the term, revealing the complex process of negotiation, transformation, and expansion of its meanings, the insights of which are transferable to other words and contexts. Still, it is too soon to research how well “care” will endure.

This chapter will devote only marginal attention to activists’ care practices and work—these will be analyzed more in the following ones. However, while the distinction between language and practice is analytically useful, it is important to keep in mind that, in the words of Steinberg, “discursive repertoires are reciprocally linked to the repertoires of collective actions that groups develop to realize their goals” (1999, p. 12). Indeed, in l’Asilo, care discourses are about practices and care practices (or lack thereof) are what instigate care discourses.

Tarrow (2013) builds on Bakhtin (1981) and Steinberg (1995, 1999a) to argue that changes in contentious language are always “dialogic.” They emerge “from the thrust and parry of the political process and from the slower rhythms of political and cultural change” (Tarrow, 2013, p. 12). These slow and dialogic processes are what, in this chapter, my ethnography focuses on. Tarrow’s historical approach has the advantage of accounting for changes over time, including assessments of a term’s endurance, something my analysis cannot do. Yet, what is missing from Tarrow’s account is a more detailed ethnographic attention to what happens, day after day, when a contentious word transforms its meaning.

This chapter is structured as follows. Section 2 is an ethnographic exploration of how activists at l’Asilo define care, reflecting on why it is politically significant, or contested, for them. Within this section, I also provide a detailed analysis of the processes that brought “care” into l’Asilo, focusing particularly on how the term was adopted through cross-temporal, inter-movement diffusion driven by feminist influence. Section 3 delves deeper into how the concept of care, despite its frequent invocation, often emerged most vividly in discussions regarding its perceived absence, thus becoming a locus of tension and conflict among activists. In section 4, I explicitly foreground feminist contestations around care at l’Asilo, analyzing critical voices that problematize care as superficial or instrumentalized, highlighting internal critiques regarding gendered divisions of labor and performative allyship. In section 5, I explore how these debates, despite (or perhaps thanks to) their contentious nature, have made care a powerful vehicle for feminist politics within l’Asilo, initiating a process of gradual depatriarchalization. Finally, I conclude (section 6) by synthesizing these findings and reflecting on broader theoretical and political implications. Throughout these sections, I draw

extensively from participant observation data (October 2021– July 2022) and semi-structured interviews with key informants in l’Asilo (conducted mainly in July 2022).

## **2. Contested Meanings of Care in l’Asilo**

As I mentioned already, one of the fundamental characteristics of contentious words that endure is their ambiguity (Tarrow, 2013). Care is indeed notoriously polysemic, ambiguous, and hence available. Indeed, ambiguity contributes to words being modular and therefore available for repetitions. Polletta even writes that such an ambiguity enables groups “with very different agendas to come together in a common stance” (2006, p. 19). But was “care” this ambiguous in l’Asilo, or did activists assign a shared meaning to it?

I begin with one of the numerous “plenaries” I attended at l’Asilo. Plenaries were meant to be large, special assemblies where the entire community was invited and expected to participate in discussions on significant issues. These meetings typically took place on weekends and often spanned the entire day. However, in practice, they mostly attracted the more committed activists rather than the broader community, and particularly on a warm day like May 29th, 2022, when many preferred to spend their time at the beach rather than engage in hours of debate on topics that had already been discussed extensively throughout the year.

On that particular day, the discussion revolved once again around the ongoing presence of individuals—primarily football hooligans and younger street kids—who frequented the building without participating in the community and often exhibited violent behavior. Alessandro, one of the most dedicated activists, was present. A man in his 40s with a corporate job he disliked, Alessandro found deep meaning in life through his wholehearted involvement in l’Asilo. Unlike many of the predominantly middle-class activists at l’Asilo, Alessandro was among the few ones with a natural ability to communicate with the hooligans and street kids, who recognized him as a legitimate interlocutor. Whether this connection was a cause or consequence, I cannot say, but Alessandro was consistently among those who advocated for dialogue and the weaving of relationships with these individuals, rather than seeking to expel them. Another notable trait of Alessandro was his theatrical and solemn demeanor during interventions. On this occasion, addressing the matter at hand, he proclaimed with great solemnity, in support of his argument for dialogue, that l’Asilo had taught him that “politics is

not anymore the twentieth-century kind, grounded in grand, unyielding ideals and ideologies, but rather *a process of trial and error founded on care.*” [emphasis mine]

Alessandro was not only placing care at the center of what politics means, but was touching upon fundamental issues highlighted by the literature on care, which highlights how care ethics is not a moral theory like any other, but rather a messy, situated, and trial-and-error one (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). On similar lines, Annemarie Mol, an ethnographer of care practices between doctors and patients, specifies the art of good care as acting without exerting control (Mol, 2008), and as a logic that requires knowledge, tools, and open times to experiment (Mol et al., 2015), elements that were indeed often underlined by l’Asilo’s activists as absolutely central to l’Asilo’s politics.

While Alessandro’s perspective was undeniably valuable, it was not universally shared, nor did it provide clarity on what “care” actually entailed. In the autumn of 2021, a time still deeply marked by the pandemic, l’Asilo’s community found itself in the midst of a severe internal relational crisis. Care emerged as a central issue: the lack of interpersonal care, and the disproportionate burden it placed on women without due recognition were identified as core problems. Hence, there was a broad consensus among activists that care needed to be prioritized—recognizing mutual vulnerability, valuing emotions, and paying close attention to communication, process, and the well-being of all members.

This is somewhat what I anticipated finding in the field: influenced by the growing impact of feminist movements and feminist care theories, alongside the heightened sense of vulnerability and precariousness brought on by the pandemic, the phenomenon I sought to study was what I perceived as a “care turn” in social movements. I expected the principle of caring for one another and for the world to be elevated to a hegemonic political ideal within contemporary left-libertarian social movements. At l’Asilo, although care was understood differently by various members and nearly everyone agreed that care was not fully present, this shift was undeniably taking place.

Some, however, did not even fully agree in principle. Against the emphasis on care, they argued that harsh tones were not necessarily violent but something normal in an assembly, or that conflict is a healthy aspect of politics. Against the “care turn,” for example, there was a woman artist in her 30s with a strong character, an often-conflictual attitude, and biting irony. She

argued that l'Asilo's community had begun to look more like an AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) group than a political space. On one occasion, she argued: "I would rather have direct confrontation than all this meek politeness and social correctness which, on balance, is really useless." She did not consider the personal to be always political and she often insisted that, for her, l'Asilo was a place of work, not one for friendships, and that she did not care about "the community."<sup>32</sup>

This view was challenged, in turn, by another activist's intervention at a later assembly:

I am sorry that, of all the things we have done, what has been stronger is a speech, or a person, who can even imagine that there can be a process without affectivity, and talk coldly about self-management, powers, etc. Things I never saw as a junior. For me, you - Carlotta, Andrè, Gianmarco - are the ones who have always helped me to do what for me is political: practices.

But what did care truly mean to l'Asilo's activists? After months of participant observation, I found it crucial to ask activists directly, through semi-structured interviews, how they would define care within the context of l'Asilo. It was important to frame the definition of care within the specific context of l'Asilo, ensuring that the question was not abstract or theoretical, but rather directly connected to lived experiences relevant to this study. Moreover, during the interviews, I deliberately refrained from mentioning care until the very end, to avoid prompting respondents to adopt a care-focused lens or vocabulary they might not have otherwise used. Interestingly, despite this approach, many participants still brought up the concept of care on their own before I posed the direct question.

Alberta, a researcher in her 30s and one of the most dedicated activists with particularly strong feminist views, responded that care in l'Asilo meant, quite literally, "nothing." She then elaborated:

In l'Asilo we often talk nonsense about care [...] ... Well, now in general there's a lot of nonsense talk about care everywhere, by now it's hype of the concept, and everyone talks about care according to what they would like to receive. They call care what they like... however, there has been no in-depth study.

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<sup>32</sup> While not necessarily something evoked in the same terms by l'Asilo's activists, there are critiques of and a debate around what Laura Yustas calls feminist 'therapeutical culture' in movements (2022).

Sigfrido, a man in his late twenties and one of the least politicized activists, who worked part-time in a heavily bureaucratic job, instead, did not focus on what care meant in l'Asilo and started to think on the spot about the overall meaning of care, giving a long, improvised but articulated answer of which I will only copy the highlights here:

[...] Care is one of the words you can define in many ways. [...] First of all, for me care is [...] Taking care of oneself [...] Being able, not only to maintain a level, a psychological and psychophysical level that is substantially optimal [...] but also to recover a social aspect [...] social, emotional, but also on a spiritual level [...]. The problem is that immediately, in my opinion, you come to the conclusion that taking care of oneself means not being able to.... You can't do it without others! [...]. Because you realise that you live within relationships. That is, you can take care of yourself.... Being constantly, but then if you're in an environment that is instead toxic but forces you to have attitudes that are insane, for example working [...]when you're sick with a fever of 38? That's it, that's when your possibility of taking care of yourself, freeing care practices, basically begins to become less and less possible [...] because you have the rest of society imposing certain practices on you instead. [...] At a certain point they are about how you are in society and how society is constituted? [...] at some point, I would think, that there is a political dimension. Because, and here we come in..., Because the political dimension, between what is good for you and what is good for others [...] at some point is established through an encounter.

Interestingly, Sigfrido started with self-care to then develop a relational and political argument for it, though in very different ways and with a very different positionality from the self-care black feminists in the US talk about (Lorde, 2017).

Viola, a woman in her late 20s who was pursuing a PhD in art history and was just starting to engage with feminism at the time of the interview, had an opposite starting point, that is, that care mainly involved a predisposition towards others:

Caring is taking care of everyone's specificity, thus trying to relate to each one's heterogeneity, trying to relate to these individual specificities in a functional way, thus without invading too much and without letting yourself be invaded too much, let's say.

Her definition resounds loudly with much of the literature on care ethics, particularly with Mol's perspective of good care as the one in which the carer does not exert control over the

care receiver (Mol, 2008). Alice, also a woman in her late 20s whose activism in l'Asilo had always been marked by both a pedagogic and relational dedication towards the neighborhood kids that frequently stormed the building, as well as a noticeable commitment to do a lot of the invisible work to keep the building as nice and clean as possible, connected it first to the material aspects of care, and how taking care of a common space also generates collective interpersonal care, as underlined by recent literature (Sciarelli, 2024).

[...] If I think of my whole path at l'Asilo for all the initial years, right, it was very dedicated to the physical space, the matter. Because I was there when the cinema was built, when the gratings were made, the steps in the kindergarten and the proscenium... And those were moments of enormous care of the physical space l'Asilo. And here moments of caring for the physical space made sure that the group itself, that is, those who were taking care of it, also cared for each other... [...] it made me very much understand that something bigger than me was being done [...] That it was something that served everyone... the city!

In the rest of her answer, Alice mentioned how care also made her think about how she always took care of rubbish and cleaning up, hence pointing to the issue of care work and its uneven distribution (Bubeck, 1995; Gardner et al., 2024; Tronto, 1987).

Finally, Giorgio, a man in his late 40s who was widely considered among the movement intellectuals within and outside of l'Asilo, gave possibly the most sophisticated definition of care:

I link care to vulnerability, which is the ontological condition of openness. I must care so that life can remain in its dimension of openness: emotional, affective, material, biological life. I must... Care is this ecological weaving, ecological on all the levels that we have mentioned, which allows us to remain proliferative. Care in l'Asilo is to do exactly that: to work on the conditions whereby we can remain exposed without dying, without experiencing death. Or, if death experience must be, because experiences end... that death is an experience of transformation, and metamorphosis. For me this is what care is: it is caring for the conditions for there to be a worthy life.

Here care is understood in its broader ecological dimension, and relates directly to nothing less than issues of life and death. It also closely recalls the last sentence of Tronto and Fisher's famous definition, who mention caring for our "world" in order to live "as well as possible" (1990). The focus on vulnerability is also fundamental in the literature, and its link to openness

deserves attention. In particular, it seems to recall the established link between care and freedom (Graeber, 2018; Tronto, 2013). I will focus on these specific aspects, and Giorgio's definition more in general, in chapter 7. I now have provided an overview of the most significant answers that activists gave me when asked about the meaning they assigned to the word "care," particularly for their politics in l'Asilo. These meanings were diverse and reflected both personal trajectories and political sensibilities. Alberta dismissed the term as overused and lacking depth; Sigfrido approached it through the lens of self-care, gradually articulating its relational and political dimensions; Viola framed it as an attunement to others' specificities and boundaries; Alice anchored it in material maintenance and the relational care it generates; and Giorgio elaborated a broader ecological understanding, rooted in vulnerability and transformation. Yet a fundamental issue of "care" as a term remains unaddressed: how and when did the term arrive at l'Asilo? The next subsection analyzed this process of care diffusion.

### **3. Feminist "Care": An Ethnographic Lens of a Keyword Diffusion**

The concept of diffusion provides valuable insights into how a concept, or its evolving political significance, propagates across time and space. Processes of social movement diffusion elucidate how the behaviors, ideas, and organizational structures of a social movement disseminate through various channels. These channels include direct ties, such as participating in protests together; indirect ties, like media coverage; and the involvement of intermediaries, such as brokers. This diffusion process is inherently interactive, involving individuals and organizations that experiment with, interpret, and ultimately adopt new ideas in diverse ways (Soule & Roggeband, 2018). In this context, the "new" idea subjected to experimentation, translation, and adoption in l'Asilo was the concept of "care."

Sidney Tarrow's study on contentious language demonstrates how vast and rapid can be its diffusion (2013). This is also the case for care, that has diffused in l'Asilo as a result of the combination of two processes: on the one hand, a cross-temporal inter-movement diffusion of the concept from past and current waves of feminism, and on the other hand the pandemic critical juncture and the associated increased relevance of meaning-making activities by social movements (della Porta, 2022).

The theory of framing (Snow et al., 1986) can partially explain the reasons and mechanisms through which care diffused to l'Asilo, but not entirely. Snow and colleagues argued that by

making events or occurrences meaningful, frames organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective. They assert that “frame alignment,” the process through which social movements connect their interpretive frameworks with those of individuals or groups to facilitate participation and mobilization, is a necessary condition for participation in a movement, regardless of its nature or intensity (Snow et al., 1986, p. 464). Different types of frame alignment can occur. Della Porta and Lavizzari argue that during the pandemic, “care” was used as a “bridging frame in many social movements” campaigns in Italy, including those within the Society of Care protest network (della Porta & Lavizzari, 2022). Frame bridging links ideologically similar but structurally unconnected frames around a particular issue. However, care has also undergone two other significant forms of frame alignment: “frame amplification,” which involves clarifying and invigorating an interpretive frame around a particular issue (p. 469), and “frame extension,” which occurs when a movement seeks to expand its adherent base by aligning its objectives with the values or interests of potential supporters (p. 472). The broader adoption of “care” as a frame by various social movements’ campaigns in Italy helps explain how the concept entered the vocabulary of activists at urban commons like l’Asilo. While the broader adoption of care as a mobilizing frame helps explain its diffusion into the activist vocabulary of urban commons like l’Asilo, the theory of framing has limitations in this context. It primarily attends to how movements project meaning outward to publics or potential participants. However, as l’Asilo’s assemblies are open and porous, the distinction between internal and external framing is blurred. Activists were not only negotiating meaning among themselves but also seeking to engage and persuade others—visitors, newcomers, potential allies—through these discussions. Moreover, even within the organization, framing processes were evident as participants advanced interpretations, justified strategies, or gathered support for particular positions. In this sense, framing theory remains a useful lens, though it must be supplemented by approaches attentive to the embodied, relational, and prefigurative ways in which care was practiced, debated, and lived within l’Asilo. In the following paragraphs, I focus on the specific and counterintuitive ways in which care diffused within l’Asilo, a case that serves as a model for the broader process of “care” diffusion across contemporary Italian activism. Moreover, this chapter has broader implications for understanding the complex ways in which newly politicized terms spread across social movements.

The diffusion of ideas within social movements can be understood through the frameworks of relational and non-relational diffusion, as outlined by Givan et al. (2010). Relational diffusion

refers to the spread of concepts through direct interpersonal connections, often facilitated by movement missionaries: activists who carry ideas and contentious language from one context to another, either through migration or deliberate engagement. At l'Asilo, relational diffusion played a crucial role in introducing and integrating the concept of care. This process was driven by key brokers, such as activists deeply involved in Naples' feminist movements, particularly the local branch of *Nun Una Di Meno*. These individuals, through their personal connections and active participation in the movement, were instrumental in bringing care into l'Asilo's discourse and practices.

Non-relational diffusion, in contrast, involves the dissemination of ideas through impersonal channels like media and word-of-mouth, where direct personal interaction is not required. At l'Asilo, non-relational diffusion was equally significant, with independent media, book publications, and social networks serving as vital conduits for spreading information about care practices. These channels were particularly important for activists who remained informed and connected through these broader, impersonal networks, allowing the concept of care to reach a wider audience without relying on direct interpersonal ties. In the following section I analyze the diffusion of the contentious language of care in l'Asilo through an ethnographic feminist lens.

I entered the field with the idea that the discursive inflation of care in social movements would be paralleled by a discussion and adoption of feminist theories and practices of care: from redistributing care work as a precondition for gender justice, anticapitalism and democracy to discussions on care ethics or ecofeminism (Federici, 2020; Tronto, 2013; Mies & Shiva, 1993). Yet, this expectation was hardly satisfied. Here, I show how my participant observation quickly revealed that while "care" was invoked, it was often missing in concrete practice, prompting questions about "carewashing" (a term implying a superficial appropriation of care concepts).

The time I spent in l'Asilo was not an easy one for its community: several combined factors (the Covid-19 pandemic, the reverberance of previous interpersonal tensions, activists' generational change) hit it at the same time, marking the months I spent there with communicational difficulties, conflicts, and different forms of violence among activists. Hence, from the very first months I was there, as a researcher, I was confronted with this dilemma: while care was often evoked by activists (my ethnographic object was in this sense very present), it was mostly evoked in motivational or negative terms. By motivational, I mean

sentences like “let’s put care into this,” “let’s not forget about care,” etc. By negative, I mean activists expressing a frustrating and problematic lack of care. It happened quite often, when I mentioned to activists what my research was about, that they would suggest to me, with a mix of irony and despair, to go and investigate care somewhere else, as in l’Asilo it was nowhere to be found.

On a rainy November night in 2021, during the early phase of my research stay in Naples, I found myself discussing my observations with a friend who, while not a participant in l’Asilo, was actively engaged in various Neapolitan feminist movements. She inquired about the progress of my research, and I candidly shared my current observations: I had been encountering frequent references to the concept of *cura*, yet I remained uncertain about how this reflected the theoretical and practical influences of feminist movements on others. She offered a thought-provoking perspective: the feminist groups she was involved with did not emphasize *cura* extensively. This lack of emphasis, she suggested, was because caring for one another, creating space for each other, eschewing domineering behavior, and ensuring that everyone had a chance to speak in assemblies were seen as fundamental, almost instinctive practices within these groups. Consequently, these practices did not need explicit articulation.

Reflecting on her insight, I considered that the prominence of talk about *cura* in other movements, such as those advocating for the commons, might stem from a lack of deep-rooted care practices and theories within those groups. In these contexts, where the need for such practices is recognized but not yet fully integrated, the concept of *cura* becomes a focal point for discussion and articulation. This effort, I thought, reflects a broader societal push to challenge entrenched paradigms, with language serving as a preliminary tool for change. While language alone is insufficient for transformation, it is not necessarily a case of “carewashing” since there is no intention to obscure or trivialize the issue. Rather, it seems to be a willingness to accept a paradigm shift and acknowledge an important aspect of politics, as feminists suggest, that has not been considered central before.

Her opinion appeared to resonate with my ongoing observations in the field over subsequent months. Care seemed to be evoked mostly in relation to its absence. To put it differently: it was the most important absent. The recognition of its importance, as I elaborate below, was influenced by feminist movements, epistemologies, writings, and practices during a period of global vulnerability induced by the Covid-19 pandemic. Handling the pandemic ethically,

particularly within l'Asilo, became a focal point of discussions on care, particularly during the latter months of 2021 and the initial months of 2022.<sup>33</sup> These included the concept of “care of relationships,” as framed by l'Asilo's activists, as well as the emphasis on activists' self-care or on facilitated collective care processes aimed at addressing issues such as a lack of community cohesion, communication toxicity, and violence.<sup>34</sup>

Following Tarrow's framework, two primary variables help explain the durability and diffusion of linguistic changes in political contexts: symbolic resonance and strategic modularity. Both of these, I argue, are well represented by the concept of care. First, symbolic resonance refers to the extent to which a term aligns with culturally familiar concepts, allowing it to resonate deeply within a given social or political context (Snow & Benford, 1988). Care exemplifies this phenomenon as it denotes an inherently familiar concept. In fact, its familiarity is literal—care is primarily associated with kinship structures and the household, making it a deeply ingrained element of social life (Thelen, 2015). Historically, the political articulation of care has emphasized its role in reproduction within the household, particularly through feminist critiques that foreground its economic and social significance (Federici, 2020).

Second, strategic modularity refers to the adaptability of a term across different strategic contexts without losing its original advantages. Tarrow (2013) defines it as “the degree to which terms that emerge in one strategic context can be repeated without losing the strategic advantages they originally possessed” (p. 17). Care exemplifies this quality as well. Emerging from feminist movements, it has been strategically mobilized by movement actors across a wide range of political agendas. From environmental struggles to mutual aid networks, the concept of care is continuously reworked and recontextualized to fit diverse political struggles (The Care Collective, 2020). Its elasticity enables it to serve as a unifying frame across different sectors of activism while maintaining its radical potential. Thus, care is both symbolically resonant and strategically modular. Its deep cultural embeddedness allows it to gain traction across a range of political movements, while its adaptability ensures its continued relevance in ever-changing activist contexts. These characteristics make care a particularly powerful tool for political mobilization and transformation.

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<sup>33</sup> See Chapter 6

<sup>34</sup> Also see Chapter 6

Alessandro, the activist I introduced earlier in the chapter, who often displayed a theatrical flair, was particularly drawn to the concept of “care” as a novel political principle that resonated with him more than any other. He envisioned care as central to l’Asilo’s ethos, so much so that for the venue’s 10th anniversary in March 2022, he had proposed framing the celebration around the theme of care, naming it “l’ASILO 10: CARE.” Alessandro possessed a genuine curiosity, valuing the pursuit of new questions, research, and experimentation—a trait he deemed essential not only personally but also for collective political endeavors. A Monday night in May 2022, over dinner with a group of around 8 people at La Rurale, a favorite spot following assembly meetings, Alessandro engaged in a memorable conversation with Mario after a few glasses of wine, in which he solemnly declared: “Mario, sometimes you are too sure about things. I like to be unsure about things. This is what distinguishes a collective and a commons: a collective is more about certainty, a commons is more about doubt!” He was referring, again, to that trial-and-error process he now saw as the essence of politics, a politics of care.

With this spirit, that same night, he approached Giorgio, a man who had been deeply involved in *Non Una di Meno* (NUDM)<sup>35</sup> for several years, seeking insights into how care was practiced within the feminist movement. Giorgio emphasized the seriousness with which care was approached within NUDM, asserting that care practices and principles had fundamentally transformed the movement’s politics on an anthropological level. “Care of relationships,” he said, was something much deeper than it is in l’Asilo or elsewhere, “though l’Asilo is actually not that bad compared to other spaces.” He also affirmed that “if today we talk about care in l’Asilo, it is thanks to the work that in the last 6/7 years feminists have done. It became a condition, a minimum condition for movements’ doing politics.” Alberta, at this point, interrupted and said: “yes, sure, we now talk about care, but there is a lot of *washing*. Everyone talks about it, but without giving it much meaning. And I’m not talking about governments etc. who of course do it as well, but I’m saying *within the movement!*”

Of course, this is true, the conversation proceeded, but it is normal for every radical concept as it becomes more mainstream. Giorgio had argued that it was an inevitable tension, as even bell hooks, in her famous work *Feminism is for everybody*, had written that when she was able to push feminisms in the school/university program, suddenly the actual content was

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<sup>35</sup> The main feminist social movement organization in Italy in the last few years.

deradicalized, yet she was conscious that this was nonetheless a fundamental achievement (hooks, 2000). So, it was okay to recognize it as a kind of constant tension, and struggle, to maintain and negotiate the radical meaning of concepts while they become watered down as they get more mainstream.

Yet the remark by Alberta about “carewashing” and the loss of its radical meaning is to be taken seriously. In an interview, as an activist and researcher involved in several national and international movement networks, she gave her own nuanced account of care diffusion, and washing:

It is the whole movement that talks more about care and, in my opinion, it’s a question of power relationship. Well, let’s say that Covid, for sure, has brought a dimension, a discourse of care once again very much relegated to a material care that has often also become securitarian. Very problematic! However, apart from this, these are categories that the movement has had to take on because of a power relationship. What do I mean? At a certain point, probably I think before the pandemic, the transfeminist<sup>36</sup> movement began to take on such a strength that the [other] movements could no longer gloss over the issue. A bit like the environmental issue... well, also the feminist one. Movements just couldn’t ignore this, and clearly care is one of these things. So much so that even xxx [she cites an organization that is part of the Society of Care], which had never been feminist, had to talk about care, then emptied of all trans-feminist elaboration on care, as well as in l’Asilo, where no one has ever delved into it. But the word came into use, in my opinion, because of a power relationship that led the movements to no longer be able to stop, that is, to no longer be able not to talk about feminism. Even if in the practices, maybe there is an effort but not that much, in discourse yes...

Interestingly, Alberta introduced a further mechanism beyond symbolic resonance and strategic modularity, what we might call a power-relational uptake. This occurs when a concept becomes so central within an adjacent movement field (e.g., “care” or “femicide” for feminists, “climate justice” for environmentalists, “genocide” for Palestinian solidarity) that other actors can no longer ignore it without signaling misalignment with a core plank of the struggle. It was possibly a combination of these mechanisms, but with regards to the influence that NUDM had on the thematization of *care* in l’Asilo virtually all activists agreed. Giorgio,

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<sup>36</sup> The term *transfemminismo* is commonly preferred over “feminism” in Italian grassroots movements, as it explicitly includes trans, queer, and non-binary subjectivities and signals from the outset a feminism that is intersectional and anti-essentialist.

one of the activists involved in l'Asilo since the very beginning, explained that a sensibility on care was there from the start, but that NUDM was key to this process:

In l'Asilo this reasoning was partly there from the beginning. There was a sensitivity about that. But also because at a certain point some of us, at the beginning basically me, and Ginevra, and then among the youngest Gionata, but also Mario, we attended the Non Una di Meno assembly [...] and we invited Non Una di Meno to “cross the space.”<sup>37</sup> I had the need for it to cross the space of l'Asilo, because you know, Non Una di Meno, for years, held its assemblies here, and this... This co-presence also implied a co-presence of themes, and so some things were nurtured.

Nonetheless, the issue of the hype of a feminist concept which in l'Asilo was emptied of its feminist radicality was not only highlighted by Alberta: several (especially women) activists expressed the same concern, as I show in the following paragraphs.

#### **4. Beyond the Buzzword: Feminist Contestations of Care at l'Asilo**

Many women activists lamented that the presence of NUDM in l'Asilo, and the fact that they organized assemblies there, was largely used as a “medal” to claim that l'Asilo was feminist and that cared about *care*, but that, in reality, the latter was mostly an empty word. Viola recognized that it was a useful concept, but that it needed to be studied, understood, and practiced in the real sense of the term:

It's just bandying about, like the feminist assembly medal we put on in 2019<sup>38</sup>. We put it on so it's all right. We put on the medallion that in l'Asilo we practice care, especially during the pandemic, because some male comrades wanted this to be practiced, and so you have to have care, care, care. And during the pandemic, we put this very term on the agenda, every day, really every day now that you mention it, but then emptying... that is, in the deep sense of the thing, if you go and ask... But me too! That is, if you ask me precisely... we must equip ourselves with tools! We must equip ourselves with tools! That is, care shouldn't just be... no! We sit down and study! We did this workshop on care last year, but there were four of us? Four? Five?

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<sup>37</sup> I translated the Italian expression *attraversare lo spazio* literally as “cross the space” because it is a very peculiar expression, that I only heard in the Italian left-libertarian activist realm, to indicate when someone participates in non-core ways to the activities of an occupied social center or another political space. Activists themselves are aware of the peculiarity of the expression, as testified by the circulation of a *meme* saying: “normal people do things, we ‘cross spaces.’”

<sup>38</sup> The reference is to the Non Una di Meno's national assembly, that was held in l'Asilo in 2019

Alberta also had further thoughts about it:

And when the comrade came to do a self-education workshop [about care], she was also hardly listened to. Then, of course, the term was always there... that is, care is a feminist concept, which takes so much of its elaboration from the transfeminist tradition. Instead, in L'Asilo, this dimension is an emptying of anything. That is, whatever transfeminist theme you bring, —of clear transfeminist vocation— you bring, you find it emptied of the transfeminist vocation. Every time you try to talk about violence you confuse gender violence and another kind of violence into an indistinct whole. Then well... it is clear that L'Asilo is actually capable of care. In the economy of what one sees outside L'Asilo, here there is still more care, and it's easy to notice. But it is probably very little thematized. Then again, there is also a tendency to use the word in an empty way.

Bruna, in a single speech that it is worth reporting in full, brought together many different themes, starting from a macroscopic look onto diffusion processes starting from the last wave of feminism in Latin America and getting to the gendered division of labor in L'Asilo:

I saw this a lot, for example, when Bolsonaro came up, or when there were demonstrations in Chile, for example. I mean: the winds of feminism that came from South America, that reverberated in Spain a lot, that were intercepted in Italy, and from that small nucleus that is Non Una di Meno in 2018 in Naples, we carry on with this Napoleon coat, this, this Monopoly banknote from a long time ago, which was the national...[assembly] of Non Una Di Meno. Eh “L'Asilo is an inclusive space because it has hosted...” “No guys, no!!!” That thing happened because there were women comrades from outside l'Asilo and it happens that those women comrades don't meet here anymore... I mean it's clear! It's obvious that it didn't work, right? [...] You know, there's also that whole rhetoric of “the good comrade.” That is, the rhetoric of the good [male] comrade that is that thing of “no, no way, of course I am a feminist” and a woman comrade arrives and says “look brother, you are not,” and you barricade yourself behind your ideas, behind your things, and you don't unhinge yourself for a moment and say “fuck, maybe I was wrong until now, it's really something that I don't see...” [Viola looks around the L'Asilo's theatre's foyer and points at a poster] *El patriarcado no va más*<sup>39</sup>, that thing was hang in 2018 by the comrades of Non Una di Meno and it's still there! [...] Ok, feminists: I too have been on this path of personal depatriarchization for a while now, it's not that... I mean, when I got here I was in a super-toxic relationship, and all my women comrades were in a super-toxic solution, and when the male spoke in the assembly, the male was speaking in the

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<sup>39</sup> Spanish slogan meaning “Patriarchy is no more.”

assembly... it is clear that the action of care, even in here, was delegated to women for years, that is, l'Asilo was female because l'Asilo was supported by females who, even a little unaware themselves of being females at the service of a process. "Eh, but because she does it better, the female does it better." No, shit, the female does it better, that's because you're not willing to do it! [...] a striking event in l'Asilo, at a certain point, was the arrival of Isabel, who makes this beautiful intervention in the assembly and says: "I would like to see our comrades, philosophers and jurists, washing the toilets. I would like to see so much our female comrades writing their communiqués or holding a bunches of keys." You know, the big bunches of keys have been held by men for so long, "because they are more practical, because they know better how to do things"... because there was a very clear division of responsibilities! Women stay at the computer and do the care work. The men carry on the battles. *Madonna mia!*... Eh, yes, I mean, unfortunately, these things used to happen.

In the above text, in a single flow of consciousness, Bruna expresses many of the things that are central to this section: the intercontinental, cross-temporal, and inter-movement diffusion of more feminist praxis, with its concepts and practices; the observation of l'Asilo's contradictions in relation to the latter (with the fact of having hosted the national assembly of NUDM being used by some as a badge of honor, which in turn prevents more critical reflections on gender dynamics and feminism); and strong criticism of some of l'Asilo's men's performative allyship. Bruna also includes a personal reflection on her own process of "depatriarchalisation" and recounts the tale of the extremely gendered division of labor that used to assign care work to women and "intellectual" work to men, which was once the norm in l'Asilo. A pivotal moment in challenging these dynamics came through the intervention of Isabel, a Latin American activist (which can be understood as relational diffusion). In an assembly, her pointed critique revealed how women were relegated to care work (managing infrastructure and logistics) while men dominated decision-making and leadership roles. This entrenched dynamic, Bruna argued, remained unchallenged for years, reflecting broader societal patterns.

The cynicism surrounding care discourse at l'Asilo was not limited to women activists. Luca, a male activist, offered a critical perspective on how men engaged with care rhetorically while avoiding deeper transformations.

If we think in terms of class positioning (our radical, leftist, critical, bourgeois class) then we see that this class has learned perfectly well that care is the word of the decade. Care, ecology, feminism: these are the buzzwords. And so, we know exactly how to use them in discourse, effortlessly.

Luca provocatively suggested:

To be honest, for us cis-hetero men it's much easier to say that care is about cleaning toilets. It's easier to embrace the idea of care as "maintenance work" than to actually engage in collective emotional labor. Let's be real: it's easier to clean toilets at l'Asilo than to let go of control and enter into a truly collective language of care.

## **5. Care Discourses as Vehicles for Feminism**

Despite, or even thanks to, the feminist criticisms of the superficial understanding of care in l'Asilo, Bruna's segment already transmits a sense of progression compared to the past ("these things used to happen"), towards a more feminist commons. This progression is not isolated from a general trend in society, yet it is interesting to investigate the specific way in which the process takes place within left-libertarian social movements and spaces, given they often represent societal vanguards in the spread of emancipatory frameworks, such as feminism.

In fact, during the time I spent in l'Asilo, an increasing number of discussions and initiatives have been taken in the name of care and feminism, igniting new common senses into the space. In particular, feminism and care have been brought up as an approach to deal with violent conflicts, both among activists (see chapter 6) and with other parts of the neighborhood (see chapter 7). In addition, in spring 2022 a "men's self-consciousness circle" was started, as well as a mixed "depatriarchalisation working group" and a non-mixed circle, both in l'Asilo and at the level of the Neapolitan Commons network in which l'Asilo participates. Increasingly, collective cleaning days have been called for to call out and transform the gendered division of labor, and transfeminist and queer initiatives have been increasingly invited to l'Asilo. Notably, shortly after my fieldwork ended, the Neapolitan ballroom scene started to regularly host voguing events in l'Asilo, which meant, to the least, that non-gender-conforming subjectivities started to regularly cross the space.<sup>40</sup> To some extent, also the influx of new generations of activists in l'Asilo's ranks has also helped increase feminist sensitivities.

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<sup>40</sup> "Voguing" refers to a highly stylized form of dance originally created in the 1980s by black and Latino LGBTQ communities in Harlem, New York, as part of the Ballroom subculture.

All this should not sound as if l'Asilo has achieved being a feminist space, as it probably cannot be said fully of any space existing in a predominantly patriarchal society, and even less in a mixed space with a high proportion of middle-aged activists in a city where sexism is relatively more widespread than elsewhere. Indeed, several micropolitical patriarchal dynamics are present, many sexist episodes took place during my fieldwork in l'Asilo, and many more happened in the following months, as I have learned from l'Asilo's comrades over the phone and in subsequent visits to Naples: from the time when l'Asilo was called out by feminist activists because one of its commoners had written a sexist post on his Facebook wall, to several women taking steps back from the space for it not being feminist and safe enough, to actual cases of sexual harassment that emerged and were dealt with, more or less successfully, by the non-mixed circle and the wider community, often very conflictually. Sexist violence in activist spaces is something widespread, not necessarily more than in wider society, but more visible and problematized precisely because of feminist and non-hierarchical aspirations of left-libertarian movements. How activist communities can deal with internal sexist violence is a topic of much relevance for movements, to which recent publications circulating widely in movement circles both in Italy (Palomba, 2023) and Spain (Vari@s Autor@s, 2020) were dedicated.

The two fundamental takeaways for my argument are: first, that discursive tools and principles can be simplified, emptied and have limited practical effects, but, at the same time, they set a benchmark to which activist groups need to be somewhat accountable to. Second, that processes of discourses' performativity, or dialectical relationship between discourse and practice, such as with care, are most often uneven and conflictual ones. When a group of women left l'Asilo's assembly indefinitely because of the perceived immobility of the mixed assembly vis-à-vis gender issues, one of them (possibly the most vocal activist on feminism in the community) told me: "this is actually not a bad thing, as it shows conflictual dynamism over these issues." The conflictual dynamism between aspired principles and reality will reappear in the following pages.

In relation to feminism, some dynamic progression was also identified by activists themselves. Viola, for example, had her foot in the ground, but was somewhat hopeful:

I think that the fact that we were contaminated by feminist campaigns that had also crossed other realities—I think about that project on the Feminization of Politics and this other one [the

depatriarchalisation working group]—certainly may have played an important role, but I would like to see more practice and more emphasis on that aspect of care [the feminist one] and that we provide ourselves with the tools in that sense, not the banal care over the... just for the pandemic, to say. And I hope that through this depatriarchalisation working group we can explore various themes, can't we? Not only... That is, that at some point we also do readings on this, and equip ourselves with appropriate tools...

Also a couple of men activists, perhaps among the ones that had a deeper understanding of the feminist implications of care, or at least of the importance of it, were somewhat hopeful for the future, even with radical positions. Giorgio expressed hope and confidence:

I notice now that there is a greater sensitivity. And yet it's not by chance that this sensitivity comes from outsiders like yourself, younger people, who have less of the old-fashioned superstructure of the social centers. There is a rebirth of the need for male self-consciousness or anti-patriarchal self-formation, not by chance among younger elements. [...] Non Una di Meno turned it into a public issue, it made it a question of how one stood in the streets, how one organized the marches, and it questioned the male comrades. It unveiled those silent and invisible forms of violence that were being exercised and for which the theme of care today, hoping that it does not become a mainstream theme for which... I call them the stoups, for which we put the stoup of feminism, the stoup of ecology - for which one puts the U at the end of words<sup>41</sup>, or makes some reference to care, and thinks that one has solved the problem while not changing anything in one's mental, cultural, emotional approach. I remain confident about this for now, and I believe we must be allies of the comrades who are doing this work. By "we" I mean us comrades who live with the privilege of being male in context made for men.

Mario was particularly conflicted by the role he would have to play in this process, and had quite radical ideas about how to go about it:

That is to say, as a privileged male, white, etc., perhaps my contribution to complexity needs to go back to being a little more purely anarchist, anarchist, libertarian, etc., which includes a number of transfeminist attentions, but which has the capacity, probably by not admitting that you are doing that, to be freer. As a male I have difficulty, I have had a lot of difficulty expressing myself in the field. Because... only female comrades maybe have to do it. But this difficulty is starting to weigh too heavily on me. So probably, for me, the l'Asilo at this moment should be reoccupied, but by the

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<sup>41</sup> One of the ways for making words gender-neutral in Italian

female comrades, that is, there should be a non-mixed decision-making space, that is how I think. Right now decisions should only be made by the female comrades and we boys go and do other things elsewhere. This is my idea at this moment in history...

As it can be observed above, as well as in subsequent sections and throughout the whole dissertation, men were among the most enthusiastic explicit supporters of giving importance to “care” in l’Asilo. Given the seemingly paradoxical pattern, it is worthwhile thinking about a few reasons or hypotheses. After all, it is not so surprising that men are those who feel the urge to name care as a guiding principle: first, men might be engaged in what has been termed “performative allyship,” that is, seeking approval and validation as feminists in a historical moment in which feminism has gained hegemony in left-wing social movements (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). Another reason could also be that, because men too suffer from patriarchy (though less and in a different way than women), they might find in care (being usually socialized less to it than women) a truly novel way to understand politics, and life, which they need to voice more, precisely because they are normally less prone to think in these terms. These hypotheses are not mutually exclusive.

It is evident how care in l’Asilo was a central yet conflictive concept. A widely valued one, diffused from feminism, yet an object of *washing*: that is, emptied of its radical implications. A buzzword, yet at the same time a vehicle that in subtle or conflictive ways was indeed “feministicizing” or “depatriarchalizing” l’Asilo. A mutual aid ethic to be used in and against the pandemic, yet a defective one. A fundamental principle and practice to be guided by in the effort to deal with relational conflicts within the community, yet something most people saw as lacking, and some did not agree with.

The trajectory of care in l’Asilo can be summarized as follows: “Care” entered l’Asilo’s vocabulary through a combination of inter-movement diffusion from the recent wave of feminist protests and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which made the concept resonate with activists and society at large. However, the term was adopted as an “empty” or ambiguous concept, leading to conflicts among activists over its true meaning and implications. Despite this vagueness, and the criticisms from feminist activists, the ongoing debates reflect a dynamic and non-linear process of “depatriarchalisation” of politics in the space, in which “care” language is increasingly pivotal and has a dialectical relationship with practices.

## 6. Conclusion

The debates at l'Asilo reveal the contested nature of care as a political concept. While its symbolic power facilitates diffusion across movements, its practical realization often remains uneven and fraught with contradictions. Care serves as both a unifying ideal and a site of conflict, highlighting tensions between rhetoric and practice, individual and collective responsibilities, and competing visions of transformation within activist spaces. The critique of carewashing, performative allyship, and entrenched gendered divisions of labor underscores the complexities of actualizing care as a radical political practice. The way care is invoked (sometimes earnestly, sometimes strategically, and sometimes through its very absence) suggests that its political significance lies as much in failures and contestations as in successes. Rather than a stable foundation, care operates as a field of struggle, shaping and being shaped by the tensions within contemporary activism. At l'Asilo, the circulation of “care” was not only symbolic or strategic but also shaped by what I term a power-relational uptake: once a concept gains centrality in adjacent movement fields (for example, through NUDM), ignoring it signals misalignment. This uptake can diffuse a norm while simultaneously intensifying internal struggles over its meaning and implementation.

A particularly evocative moment during my fieldwork was the public screening of *Un fallimento perfettamente riuscito* (*A Perfectly Successful Failure*), a self-produced film by l'Asilo's activist artists. Although the title referred to different debates, it is emblematic of how care circulated at l'Asilo. Virtually all activists I engaged with perceived care there as absent or misunderstood, a failure in practice. Yet this very failure made it central to discussions on ethics, community cohesion, and activist responsibility. Ultimately, the paradoxical success of care at l'Asilo lies in its contestation. The friction and debate surrounding care fueled broader reflections on gender, ethics, and movement strategy, demonstrating that even partially realized ideals can shape activism in profound ways. As l'Asilo's experience shows, the struggle to actualize care as a political practice is neither linear nor resolved but remains an ongoing process of negotiation, reflection, and transformation.

The analysis in this chapter uncovers the tensions and complexities inherent in the framing and performance of care at l'Asilo, where it emerges as “relational, concrete, and dynamic” (Steinberg 1999 cited in Tarrow, 2013, p. 32). It is relational because it involves a dialogue between an utterance and a response, concrete because it develops within specific communities,

and dynamic as it evolves through an interactive process of contention with significant others (Tarrow, 2013, pp. 32–33). First, while care was frequently invoked, its absence most often served as the focal point for discussions on ethics, community cohesion, and activist practice. Second, evoking care itself became a site of struggle, producing tensions and negotiations over its meaning. A central issue was what some activists identified as “carewashing,” namely the constant invocation of care that empties it of radical content. This reflected a broader acknowledgment that discursive tools and principles such as “care” and “transfeminism” can undergo simplification and dilution, restricting their practical impact. However, even in contested form, care functioned as a benchmark against which activists measured their actions, shaping how its boundaries were negotiated and redrawn. This suggests a broader pattern in which widely diffused political concepts can enable new forms of collective action while generating internal struggles over meaning. In this case, NUDM’s prominence made “care” an obligatory reference point, illustrating how external movement salience can mandate adoption in ways that both broaden coalition possibilities and sharpen intragroup contention.

In linking this chapter to the dissertation’s overarching research question, I find that care operates as both a catalyst for radical transformation and a site of contradictions. The “perfectly successful failure” of care at l’Asilo encapsulates a broader paradox: how a powerful yet polysemic concept can shape a group’s political vision, sometimes more through conflict than through consensus. The tension between discursive ideals and practical realities sets the stage for the next chapter. Having examined how care at l’Asilo operated as a contested political keyword, Chapter 5 shifts from discourse to practice. It explores what happens when activists attempt to materialize care in everyday governance, particularly in moments of acute crisis. If care at l’Asilo was often evoked but inconsistently enacted, what happens when activists aim to collectively translate its ethical aspirations into practice? How do they navigate the frictions between rejecting rules and roles while embedding care in the politics of the urban commons? In tracing these tensions, the next chapter reveals both the transformative potential and the fragility of care infrastructuring in urban commons movements.

## **Chapter 5**

# **From Prefigurative Spontaneity to Deliberative Care Infrastructuring: Radical Care Politics in Times of Crisis at l'Asilo**

### **1. Introduction**

In Chapter 4 I traced how “care” became a contested political keyword at l'Asilo: mapping its pandemic- and feminist-inflected diffusion, the frictions it provoked (carewashing, performative allyship), and the way conflict, as much as consensus, shaped the collective's vision. This chapter ethnographically explores the processes generated therefrom, spanning the many months of my fieldwork. In this chapter I shift from the discursive to a more practical terrain: from what care *means* to what care *does*. Yet language remains pivotal, for at l'Asilo discourse is the primary lever for changing practice. Chapter 6 will probe this centrality further by contrasting l'Asilo with Àgora, where care stayed largely unspoken yet materially embedded.

This chapter adopts a *processual approach* to care politics: it reconstructs the event-sequence through which l'Asilo's ethics of care shifted from spontaneous mutualism to deliberative infrastructuring. Following processual sociology's insistence that social worlds are best understood as unfolding configurations of relations rather than fixed entities (Abbott, 2016; Donati, 2012; Powell, 2013) this chapter reconstructs how l'Asilo's ethics of care continually re-assembles through moments of breakdown, reflexive learning and infrastructuring. By foregrounding the temporal sequence and mutual constitution of actors, material settings and affective ties, the analysis advances a decidedly processual explanation of care politics.

I ask: what happens when activists take a normative and ethical political ideal—care—and try to translate it to the everyday governance of the commons? When care becomes more than a keyword, when the attempt is to explicitly enact it through collective action and negotiate it amid competing commitments, what tensions and contradictions emerge? Specifically, how do activists navigate care when it appears to conflict with their founding political principles, such as radical openness and spontaneity?

To answer these questions, I explore how care was practically mobilized in response to a period of acute crisis and fragmentation at l'Asilo. I focus particularly on two interconnected empirical

moments. First, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the community's everyday practices, compelling activists to grapple explicitly with questions of vulnerability, risk management, and mutual aid. Second, the internal crisis that followed, marked by intensified interpersonal conflicts, burnout, and paralysis, further magnified the contradictions inherent in l'Asilo's prefigurative governance, largely based on spontaneism. In both moments, and similarly to how I recounted in the previous chapter, *cura* was repeatedly invoked as a guiding principle, yet its practical meaning and application remained deeply contested. These crises thus provided a critical window into how care operated not just as an abstract ideal but as a site of concrete political struggle.

While the pandemic sharpened and intensified existing structural tensions, it also served as a prism, vividly refracting the inherent limits of structurelessness and illuminating the problems produced by too much spontaneism. Activists emphasized care as a collective ethical response to contagion, consciously rejecting coercive state mandates (such as Italy's Green Pass system)<sup>42</sup> and insisting upon a self-managed ethics of mutual responsibility. Specifically, this moment of crisis revealed the fragility of spontaneous care as an organizing logic: in the absence of explicit structures for accountability and responsibility, it was difficult to avoid care responsibilities falling disproportionately along gendered lines, reinforcing existing inequalities and leaving the most vulnerable members unprotected.

These fractures, far from subsiding, escalated into a broader internal crisis within the community. As debates intensified across digital and physical spaces, decision-making became paralyzed, burnout widespread, and interpersonal tensions reached unprecedented levels of antagonism. In this context, *cura* ceased to be simply an ethical aspiration and became the contested terrain upon which the very survival of l'Asilo was debated. Some activists explicitly framed the situation as a "crisis of care," calling for structured and intentional interventions to address relational fractures. The crisis reached a critical juncture when external feminist facilitation was introduced as a structured intervention aimed at mediating conflict, redistributing emotional labor, and reconfiguring informal power dynamics. This step marked a decisive shift—away from spontaneity and toward more (infra-)structured care.

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<sup>42</sup> The EU Digital COVID Certificate, known as the Green Pass, which became compulsory in Italy in July 2021 as proof of Covid-19 vaccination or immunity.

Rather than framing this shift as a simple opposition between spontaneity and structure, the nuances of this process can only be understood by placing it against the background of the *hegemony of non-hegemony*. The latter is a grassroots concept of l'Asilo and the broader Neapolitan commons movement, through which activists negotiate tensions between unity and diversity, and on which I wrote more in depth elsewhere with two other activists-scholars from l'Asilo (Velotti et al., 2024). Briefly, the hegemony of non-hegemony is how l'Asilo's activists frame the refusal to take uniform ideological directions, maintaining instead the highest possible level of open-endedness, experimentation, and openness, even while acknowledging that some level of shared commitment is required to sustain a coherent project. That is, l'Asilo's activists build unity around minimal principles (e.g. anti-fascism, anti-sexism, and anti-racism), yet intentionally avoid building a unified (counter-)hegemony. Instead, non-hegemony signifies constant openness to new participants and unanticipated needs, while the hegemonic aspect ensures that this is hardly questioned. Through this unity in diversity, the hegemony of non-hegemony is the political grammar that both acknowledges a need for minimal coherence and resists hierarchical tendencies.

This chapter's theoretical contribution lies in unpacking how activists at l'Asilo confronted the tensions inherent in what I conceptualize as *prefigurative spontaneity*—a core element of their broader commitment to the *hegemony of non-hegemony*. The concept of *prefigurative spontaneity* (introduced in the theoretical chapter) describes the intentional embrace of fluidity, improvisation, and non-hierarchical modes of governance, through which l'Asilo's activists sought to enact in the present the social relations they envisioned for the future. At the height of its activity, l'Asilo operated under what many members described as an ethos of total openness. There were no fixed roles or assigned tasks. Anyone could step in and take responsibility for organizing, cleaning, facilitating, or maintaining the space—but no one was expected to do so. This ethos was not the result of disorganization, but a principled commitment to horizontality and voluntarism. As one participant put it, “everyone is necessary, but no one is indispensable.” The idea was to prevent power from crystallizing in individuals or roles, while trusting that mutual attentiveness would sustain the collective. Activists resisted the formalization of duties or protocols not out of laziness, but because they believed that rigid procedures would undermine creativity, autonomy, and relationality.

As care obligations remained informal and unaccounted for, this mode of governance became increasingly difficult to sustain. The absence of stable mechanisms for coordination,

accountability, or conflict mediation meant that care obligations (emotional, logistical, and interpersonal) tended to fall informally on those most attuned to relational labor. Women and gender-nonconforming participants were often the ones to notice when things were falling apart, to hold the space during tensions, or to initiate conflict resolution, even when these roles were neither recognized nor supported. Without shared structures to distribute this labor, burnout, resentment, and fragmentation began to accumulate. In response, activists began to experiment with intentional infrastructures for sustaining care without fully abandoning their commitment to prefigurative spontaneity. To capture this dynamic, I introduce the concept of *deliberative care infrastructuring*—not a linear progression toward stability, but a process of continuously assembling, maintaining, and adapting governance mechanisms that sustain care, while still resisting bureaucratic institutionalization. As I detailed in the first (theoretical) chapter, I draw from feminist and Science and Technology Studies (STS) perspectives on infrastructuring as an iterative and relational process (Star & Bowker, 2002), to argue that l’Asilo’s shift was not simply about *structuring* care but about embedding care into the material, relational, and decision-making *infrastructures* of the commons. Following participatory-design scholarship that frames commons infrastructuring as a long-term “explore–reify–re-work” cycle (Seravalli, 2018), I understand deliberative care infrastructuring as the collective capacity to iteratively redesign who is accountable for care, and on what terms. I argue that l’Asilo’s struggles illustrate the necessity of deliberatively infrastructuring care not as a bureaucratic imposition, but as an ongoing process of sustaining collective well-being while remaining committed to horizontality. This perspective offers an alternative to both rigid institutionalization and the pitfalls of radical spontaneity, suggesting that radical care politics in commons movements must be continuously assembled rather than assumed. Table 1, schematizes the timeline of the main events in this chapter (*before* and *during* my fieldwork) and their related significance for my argument.

| When     | What happened                                                                                                          | Why it mattered for the unfolding process                                              |
|----------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Mar 2020 | Covid-19 reaches Naples.                                                                                               | The crisis initially stops all l’Asilo’s activities.                                   |
| Oct 2020 | Obtorto Collo self-managed safety protocol is elaborated after months of debate on masks, distancing, and rapid tests. | First attempt to translate an ethic of care into codified practices.                   |
| Jul 2021 | Italy introduces the <b>Green Pass</b> ; l’Asilo’s activists have different shades of posture toward it.               | External pressure triggers an internal legitimacy crisis around “care versus control.” |

| When                                     | What happened                                                                                                                            | Why it mattered for the unfolding process                                                    |
|------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Oct 2021<br/>FIELDWORK<br/>STARTS</b> | First assembly I participate in <b>debates</b> whether the space can remain open under pandemic (physical and psychological) strain.     | Heightened anxiety crystallizes the sense of a “care crisis.”                                |
| <b>15 Dec 2021</b>                       | <b>Firanda</b> zine-fair stress-test: voluntary mask policy falters; hierarchy of risk becomes visible.                                  | Highlights the tension between openness and collective safety.                               |
| <b>16 Dec 2021</b>                       | Positive Covid case after the first Firanda night; emergency SMS demonstrates <b>partial effectiveness</b> of voluntary tracing.         | Confirms both the fragility and the potential of self-managed protocols.                     |
| <b>20 Dec 2021</b>                       | <b>Emergency assembly</b> debates “closing the commons” versus a structured reboot; a grand plenary is proposed.                         | Reframes crisis as a learning opportunity and points the group toward external facilitation. |
| <b>Jan 2022</b>                          | <b>Grand plenary</b> with feminist mediator introduces the “triangle & square” care-governance model and trains members in facilitation. | First sign of <i>deliberative care infrastructuring</i> .                                    |
| <b>Mar–Apr 2022</b>                      | Collective designs a <b>participatory survey</b> to map tensions and invisible care labor.                                               | Institutionalizes reflexive inquiry as a routine governance tool.                            |
| <b>Late May 2022</b>                     | <b>Survey results</b> are presented to the Monday assembly; discussion focuses on redistributing relational labor.                       | Consolidates the iterative cycle of deliberative care infrastructuring.                      |
| <b>July 2022 - FIELDWORK ENDS</b>        |                                                                                                                                          |                                                                                              |

Table 1

The chapter proceeds as follows: Section 2 analyzes the merits and contradictions of mutual care ethics during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly through the ethnographic episode of the Firanda festival, showing how prefigurative spontaneity both enabled political experimentation and reinforced existing inequalities. Section 3 examines the emotional and relational costs of unstructured care, detailing how burnout, withdrawal, and resentment signaled deeper issues in l’Asilo’s prefigurative spontaneity. Section 4 traces two more structured responses to l’Asilo’s “care crisis.” First, I analyze feminist facilitation (an external process explicitly grounded in care) to show how it helped commoners find a way forward. Second, I present the participatory survey as a method for making implicit care dynamics visible and actionable, and I outline its main results. Section 5 synthesizes the chapter’s analytical insights and connects them to the dissertation’s overarching questions.

## 2. Prefigurative Spontaneity And Infrastructuring

Freeman’s (1972) seminal critique in *The Tyranny of Structurelessness*, warns that rejecting explicit structures often inadvertently reinforces informal hierarchies and uneven distributions

of power. Similarly, feminist scholars are virtually unanimous about the fact that care, when left implicit and unstructured, disproportionately burdens feminized, racialized, or otherwise marginalized subjects. Ishkanian and Peña Saavedra (2019) develop the concept of *intersectional prefiguration*, where enacting a radical democratic politics means “actively developing a collective identity, embracing an explicit commitment to organizing intersectionally, and adopting specific organizational methodologies” (p. 987). Drawing from their case of Sisters Uncut, they show how activists used safe-space policies, an Accountability Toolkit, and continuous “back-stage” reflection to translate intersectionality into daily practice. Complementing this, Tormos-Aponte and Ferrer-Núñez describe an “intersectional synthesis” as the ongoing, dialectical relation between intersectional consciousness and intersectional praxis, underscoring that inclusive structures remain under construction as ideals and practices continually reshape one another (2020). Their findings underscore that prefigurative groups, however well-intentioned, easily reproduce hierarchies unless they actively cultivate iterative, intersectional methods to tackle inequality within their own spaces.

In what follows, I trace how a similar tension emerged at l’Asilo, governed through the hegemony of non-hegemony in what I call prefigurative spontaneity. The latter, I argue, rested on three interrelated principles. First, roles were never fixed: anyone could assume responsibility for tasks, but no one was compelled to do so, reflecting a deep commitment to non-coercion (Mario loved repeating the sentence “in l’Asilo nobody is obliged to do anything”). Second, decision-making authority was fluid, with legitimacy resting not on formal consensus alone, but rather on the willingness and capacity of individuals to enact collective decisions (the sentence in this case was “in l’Asilo things happen only if there is the desire to make them happen”). Third, activists widely articulated the related idea that “everyone is necessary, but no one is indispensable,” underscoring a collective refusal to consolidate tasks within particular individuals. Hence, knowledge transfers, or a democratization of knowledge, was encouraged, seeking to distribute responsibility broadly without imposing explicit obligations. For example, by making sure that many know how the cinema projector works, so that projections do not depend on single individuals. However, as the prolonged crisis at l’Asilo vividly demonstrates, prefigurative spontaneity faced considerable troubles precisely because of its resistance to structured mechanisms. The absence of stable governance mechanisms meant that care obligations, conflict mediation, and emotional labor remained informal and unrecognized, with tasks disproportionately falling on those already more attuned to relational work, particularly women and dissident identities (“womxn,” from now on).

Mario, a long-time member of the community, was one of the most vocal supporters of the principles outlined above, and hence a pillar of prefigurative spontaneity. He articulated a strong belief in prioritizing relationships, attentiveness, and ethical practices—explicitly framed as care—over instrumental outcomes. In one interview, he explained:

No objective justifies disregard for practice, relationship, and care. No objective! That is, functionality is not a value. At most, it is a result of a community that works on attention and care. So, shockingly, the results come, but the less you think about them, the more they come.

For Mario, care had to be the deep foundation of politics, a means that is not necessarily to be collapsed with ends (he does admit, by mentioning “results,” that there are goals other than care) but that has complete precedence over them. However, despite his radical critique of instrumental rationality, structures, and planning, as the community crisis deepened, he, like others, was forced to reconsider whether care itself could be sustained without some degree of structure. In a later moment of the interview, Mario acknowledged:

When you have an unwritten ethic that arises from the practice and informality of the practice, it’s a complicated issue to bring it forward over time. Either this energy continues to flow and you have the attention to never take something for granted (and no one can do this) or you have to invent something... Ethics cannot be rules. Ethics either exist or they don’t. If they don’t exist, perhaps we need those tools that attention has finally focused on in recent years, but the practice still doesn’t have them.

Mario’s contradictory reflections encapsulate the dilemma of prefigurative spontaneity: while activists sought to keep everything, including care, as an organic ethics, the absence of clear structures made sustaining care increasingly difficult. He argued that ethics “cannot be rules,” but that “tools” could indeed be useful. This chapter, in a way, sheds light on the everyday struggles to embed these “tools”, not “rules,” within l’Asilo.

The realization that spontaneous ethics alone could not sustain care marked a turning point in l’Asilo’s approach to governance. Rather than abandoning their prefigurative commitments, activists began experimenting with new ways of embedding care into their commons-based governance. Yet, these interventions did not amount to a straightforward structuring of care

into fixed governance mechanisms, nor did they follow a pre-established blueprint. Rather than codifying care into fixed institutional frameworks, activists at l'Asilo engaged in an ongoing, experimental process of assembling, maintaining, and adapting the material, relational, and procedural conditions that sustain care. This process was neither a rejection of structure nor a straightforward embrace of formalization. Instead, it involved developing mechanisms such as facilitation, conflict mediation, and participatory research—not as bureaucratic impositions, but as necessary tools to prevent burnout and fragmentation.

In other words, to sustain care, activists had to co-construct new processes and relationships for governance—what STS scholars call *infrastructuring* (Star & Bowker 2002; Corsín Jiménez 2014). This term emphasizes the continuous, relational, and situated process of building, adapting, and maintaining shared systems. Unlike structuring, which suggests closure or stability, *infrastructuring* highlights how governance arrangements, especially around care, remain provisional, shaped by ongoing negotiation, improvisation, and contestation.

### **3. Care Against the Pandemic: Preventing Contagion with Mutual Care Ethics**

The fragility of prefigurative spontaneity became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, which confronted l'Asilo with unprecedented challenges. As the public health crisis unfolded, it revealed the limits of relying on unstructured, voluntary care alone, forcing activists to negotiate care not only as a value but as a practice of governance. While previous tensions around responsibility and recognition had simmered beneath the surface, the pandemic brought them into sharp focus. Suddenly, the stakes of care were no longer abstract: who felt safe in the space, who was exposed, who took on the labor of organizing collective protection, and who opted out, all became politically charged questions—as I show a few paragraphs below.

The crisis did not produce these contradictions; it made them visible. In the absence of formal roles or binding protocols, l'Asilo's collective had to improvise new ways of enacting mutual care—an endeavor that, while grounded in solidarity, also revealed uneven burdens and ambivalent results. What follows is an ethnographic account of how care was practiced, negotiated, and contested during this period, beginning with the internal debates around the pandemic and culminating in the organizing of the *Firanda* festival.

At the most basic level, the pandemic made *cura* unavoidable. As Tommaso put it in an interview:

Perhaps the idea [of care] was already spinning in our heads, but the pandemic made it urgent. Because, anyway, when there is a disease... you need *cura*! [...] But *cura* meant different things to different people. There was a lot of discourse about how we don't want these rigid rules, where it's just forbidden, forbidden, forbidden... No! We want to take care of each other. That's why I put on a mask—not because it's imposed, but because I take responsibility for others. I take care of the risk I could bring to them.

Tommaso's words also capture the core political dilemma that Covid-19 posed to l'Asilo: if care was to remain a voluntary, non-coercive practice, then what happened when people did not voluntarily uphold it? Bruna voiced a similar sentiment, but with more frustration about the difficulty of translating care into collective action:

We talked a lot about care during the Covid period, but care is difficult. It's a commitment. You have to do it, you have to step beyond your own limits and recognize that someone else has more limits than you. Or maybe fewer. And then you have to negotiate. We made all this *obtorto collo* thing.<sup>43</sup> It took three months! It was a huge effort to map out what we had to do: assembly with masks, without masks, distancing, no distancing... We bought rapid tests for comrades when they needed them. If a thousand combinations were necessary, we tried them all.

Bruna's words highlight the pragmatic challenge of self-managed care against the pandemic. If *cura* was to be upheld without state mandates, it had to be constructed through a complex process of negotiation, adaptation, and experimentation. And yet, this process was neither smooth nor universally accepted.

This tension was evident in the very first l'Asilo assembly I attended in October 2021, a meeting that captured the heightened anxieties over the space's survival, the disaggregation of the community, and conflicts over Covid protocols. About forty people gathered in an atmosphere of uncertainty. The very continuity of l'Asilo was in doubt—would it resist the crisis? Would it need to temporarily close? Would it be evicted? The pandemic had not only disrupted the space's activities but had also compounded existing fractures within the

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<sup>43</sup> The *Obtorto Collo* was a self-managed Covid protocol developed by l'Asilo's activists before my fieldwork and is explored more in a few pages.

collective. One particularly divisive issue was whether l'Asilo should establish clear Covid-19 safety measures, and if so, how these should be enforced.

The political landscape surrounding Covid-19 safety measures was highly polarized, and l'Asilo was no exception. The introduction of the Green Pass in July 2021 generated intense debate within activist circles, including l'Asilo (see for example the special issues introduced by Alteri et al., 2021; Bertuzzi et al., 2022; Harambam & Voss, 2023). While some saw it as a necessary public health tool, others criticized it as an authoritarian mechanism of control, arguing that it coerced compliance rather than fostering genuine responsibility. These critiques were not confined to right-wing conspiracy theorists (della Porta, 2023b); they were also voiced by segments of the autonomous left, anarchist collectives, and commons movements, who saw in the Green Pass a deepening of state surveillance and the expansion of exclusionary biopolitics.

This ideological rift within l'Asilo was not just about COVID19—it reflected long-standing tensions between different strands of leftist political thought: with anarcho-individualists' positions on one extreme and state-sympathetic institutionalists on the other, and many nuances in between. The reasons for activists to be in favor or against strict pandemic controls somewhat coincided to, but also disorderly crosscut, previous ideological stances. For example, for some, rejecting state-imposed regulations like the Green Pass was a way to resist bio-political control; while others feared that this refusal trivialized the pandemic's gravity and exposed already vulnerable people to greater risk—making collective self-protection all the more urgent. These tensions played out in assemblies and digital spaces, as activists sought to develop a pandemic response that would neither conform to state regulations nor abandon an ethics of mutual care.

At the heart of the debate was the fact that l'Asilo, as an urban commons with no specific juridical entity or person responsible for it (except for, in a sense, the city administration), had no legally responsible individuals who could impose regulations.<sup>44</sup> The collective was in a grey zone, meaning that decisions about health and safety were not dictated directly by law but by internal political and ethical negotiations. Every decision—whether to require masks, implement social distancing, or encourage testing—had to be collectively debated, agreed upon, and most importantly, implemented. The question of care, then, became a question of

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<sup>44</sup> L'Asilo's specific juridical status is explored in Chapter 3.

power: who had the right to decide what counted as care, and who was responsible for its implementation?

Despite intense disagreements, a fragile consensus existed around the idea of mutual care as the guiding principle. The ethics of care, as opposed to legal enforcement, would shape how l'Asilo navigated the crisis. Instead of mandating compliance, activists sought to cultivate an environment where individuals took responsibility for protecting one another. This had led, before my involvement in l'Asilo, to the adoption of a self-managed Covid protocol, which became known as *Obtorto Collo* (a Latin phrase meaning “reluctantly”). The name itself reflected the contradiction inherent in l'Asilo's approach: while activists were resistant to imposing rules and distancing themselves from one another, they also recognized the necessity of some form of regulation. Attendees were encouraged to take rapid Covid tests before entering, spaces were to be kept well-ventilated, and masks and physical distancing were strongly recommended, but not enforced. Rather than assigning individuals the task of monitoring compliance, the protocol relied on peer accountability, with activists urging one another—through signage, online communications, and verbal reminders—to uphold collective safety.

This was the way l'Asilo's activists navigated the balance between security and freedom, by following the pillar of their political practice: experimentation. That is, the ongoing endeavor to collectively explore novel solutions, unprecedented actions, politically shared and ambitious, yet consistent with shared principles of the assembly. Yet, without strict protocols on how to implement these measures, it was difficult to assure compliance. Some activists wore masks and practiced distancing; others did not. Those who felt unsafe stayed away from in-person assemblies, often attempting to participate online despite the many challenges of hybrid meetings. By rejecting both state-enforced mechanisms for excluding those without vaccination as well as internal rules and accountability, l'Asilo had inadvertently created conditions that excluded those who were most at risk, privileging those who could afford to disregard health concerns over those for whom exposure carried greater stakes.

This realization was probably a turning point. Yet, rather than leading to a straightforward resolution, it triggered further debate. While some activists began articulating the limits of prefigurative spontaneity, others remained skeptical of structured interventions, wary of reinforcing bureaucratic or exclusionary tendencies. This tension would shape l'Asilo's

subsequent efforts to introduce facilitation, conflict mediation, and governance mechanisms. However, before l'Asilo reached this point, it had to confront the immediate challenge of organizing a major public event in the midst of the pandemic, that would further expose the unresolved contradictions between spontaneity and structured care.

What would happen if people refused to follow the guidelines? Would a system based on spontaneous care ethics rather than enforceable rules truly protect the most vulnerable? These questions became viscerally real during the Firanda, a three-day independent drawing and zine festival that was scheduled to take place at l'Asilo in November 2021. With hundreds of attendees expected, the event became a stress test for l'Asilo's pandemic governance. The challenges were immediate. First, hosting a public event without checking Green Passes or enforcing strict rules risked attracting negative media attention—a possibility that some activists feared could justify increased repression or even eviction. Second, by refusing to check the vaccination status of individuals, it involved potentially admitting unvaccinated individuals. Counterbalancing these risks meant adopting extra precautions compared to establishments like restaurants, where people were instead allowed to eat inside and close to each other (without masks), or cinemas, where full capacity was allowed with a mask (but with no controls on how it was worn). L'Asilo, instead, had to reduce its capacity (the theatre, which can normally host 500 people, had its capacity reduced to 70/80), make sure people wore their mask, often buy covid tests so that people got tested before getting there, move the bar from the foyer to the courtyard, and so on.

The discussion in the assembly over the specificities for the Firanda was a detailed one: organizers proposed to limit each room's capacity, yet someone objected that people left outside of those rooms would then gather on the stairs and corridors, making it worse. Ginevra, then, proposed to count and cap people at the very entrance to the street. But, in this case—others observed—people would gather on the alley in front of the entrance, where they would annoy not-so-friendly neighbors. So, the assembly started moving with increased sophistication towards solutions—an example of the often-mentioned “collective intelligence” of consensus, something l'Asilo's commoners were aware and proud of. Irene proposed that a small part of Firanda took place in a close-by square, where people could be together, where to have some activist with a walkie talkie regulating who could go from the square to l'Asilo as soon as there was availability of space (i.e. when other people exited the space). Several other options were also discussed, such as a system of online free reservations, yet it was soon dismissed because,

Osvaldo noted, when reservations are not associated with a fee, they never work, because everyone books their spot but then can decide to not show up without any repercussion. Yet, l'Asilo had never charged compulsory fees: It has always only suggested to pay a very low contribution (in the case of Firanda it would be 3€ during the day and 5€ during the night), but its voluntary nature was a pillar of l'Asilo's politics and economy: selling reservations as tickets would go against l'Asilo's principles of radical openness, non-exclusive use, and accessibility.

While having these discussions, activists were justifying their suggestions on the grounds of their politics of freedom, inclusiveness, equality, and care, hence entering big political debates. For example, one of the big dilemmas that emerged was that to concretize a politics of mutual care in l'Asilo, someone needed to be somewhat excluded. In other words, asking for the Green Pass, according to many, would be exclusive towards those who dissented with this method (considered a tool for control rather than prevention) and who, hence, had not gotten one (whether or not they got vaccinated); yet, placing a maximum number of people the space could fit was also considered exclusive towards the many people who would not be able to attend. What is sure, activists noticed, was that there was an inescapable tension between care on one hand, and openness on the other. It was accepted, and stressed, that the way to go forward was to do what l'Asilo's activists were best at: political experimentation.

The first night of the Firanda illuminated the tensions inherent in l'Asilo's experiment with mutual care. As usual, I walked through the crowded historic center alleys to get to l'Asilo's main gate. Alice was tasked with welcoming people at the entrance and registering their names and contacts as part of the Covid protocol. She told me (and everyone else) to "keep the mask as an action of collective care" and gave me a yellow bracelet. Color-coded bracelets were meant to regulate attendance shifts, ensuring a Covid-safe rotation of people. The intention was that those wearing a certain color would be encouraged to leave once their allotted time had passed, making space for others without imposing rigid access controls. Yet, inside, only a handful of attendees wore masks, and the atmosphere of voluntary compliance had given way to a more chaotic reality.

Throughout the night I commented my worry to a few other activists, who also showed their concern. For activists like Mario, who had been deeply committed to rejecting state-imposed Covid mandates, this moment was a reckoning. He was convinced that the Green Pass was a

coercive control mechanism, antithetical to l'Asilo's values of self-management. However, faced with a space where mutual care was more rhetoric than reality, he voiced frustration:

We don't want to use the Green Pass because it's a stupid and useless control mechanism, so we make Covid tests for 4 euros, and we ask people to engage in collective care... but then people don't do it! This is a problem!

The air was thick and unventilated, and some people had even begun smoking indoors, leaving some (including myself) shocked and disappointed. Carlotta was also extremely concerned, as she voiced in the chat:

In this moment in l'Asilo NOBODY is wearing a mask, not even insiders, then what are we talking about if it's not us who gives the example? What political, civic, moral and *care* value are we giving? Exhibitors who smoke everywhere and with closed windows, and we still talk about *care*? *Care* of what?

The Firanda forced into the open a contradiction that had long remained latent: the belief that self-managed care could function purely as a voluntary practice. While the event did not result in an immediate pandemic breakdown, it made visible the informal hierarchies that had shaped l'Asilo's response to the pandemic. The absence of a clear enforcement mechanism privileged those comfortable taking risks while marginalizing those for whom exposure carried greater stakes. More than a logistical failure, the Firanda highlighted the political stakes of mutual care—who defined it, who bore its burdens, and whose safety it ultimately prioritized. Central to feminist care ethics is the recognition that care involves not only interpersonal attentiveness and responsiveness but also structures and practices ensuring equitable distribution of care responsibilities (Tronto, 1993). At l'Asilo, however, this balance proved precarious. The collective's rejection of state-imposed regulations, epitomized in their resistance to the Green Pass, reflected a deep commitment to care as a voluntary, spontaneous expression of mutual responsibility. Yet, during the Firanda, this voluntarism faltered precisely because care remained informally structured, relying excessively on individual goodwill. The first night of the Firanda revealed the fragility of voluntarism in moments of heightened risk, as those who felt less vulnerable were more willing to disregard precautions, while those prioritizing safety faced the difficult choice of either withdrawing or taking on the labor of enforcement themselves.

The following morning, the frustration that had been brewing inside the space exploded into the Telegram chat, where activists debated the meaning and limits of mutual care. Osvaldo, concerned about potential public backlash, suggested a pragmatic response: l'Asilo should purchase more than a 100 masks and distribute them at the entrance. His concern was not only about safety but also about reputation—if images of the maskless event circulated, it could invite media scrutiny or even state intervention, and that would be a pity given the whole organization around making tests and using the bracelet to distribute shifts. Meanwhile, Carmen framed the lack of adherence not just as a practical failure but as an exclusionary act:

Beyond the risk of ending up in the news, to me not wearing a mask is an aggressive and exclusionary manifestation. I have fragile subjects at home, I won't come to the Firanda.

Alice, who had welcomed me at the entrance the night before, wrote in the chat that she did not agree with interrupting anything, and that, instead, we should insist inviting everyone to wear masks as an act of *care*, ventilating spaces to allow accessibility and beautiful moments to be lived together.

For Carlotta, the night's events were more than an isolated incident; they revealed a deeper crisis of care at l'Asilo. She saw in the disregard for the mask policy a broader breakdown of the community's ethical commitments, one that required l'Asilo to be closed down for a while. In a furious outburst in the chat, she articulated her growing disillusionment:

No one will ever agree to close the space, you know why? Because "it's not in the practices of l'Asilo." Instead, it's in the practices of l'Asilo to [...] exclude a part of the community, to favor a part of the community that doesn't give a f\*\*k about taking care of others. The "care" that Giorgio talks about so much and then???? [...] Are we talking about care? What are we talking about? How do we expect those who approach the space to care to keep their masks on, wash their hands etc., if those who have been living in the space for years don't give a damn? What has to happen? Is there to be an outbreak? Does there have to be a death? What has to happen for the community to take action? [...] A community I no longer recognize, with great sorrow.

This debate also illuminated the gendered dimensions of care. Sascia, a young male activist, pointed out that while men had engaged in abstract discussions about the ethics of mutual care, the practical work of implementing it (reminding attendees to wear masks, enforcing shifts,

ensuring proper ventilation) had largely fallen on women. His comment reflected a broader pattern in activist spaces where the labor of maintaining cohesion and emotional well-being is disproportionately shouldered by women and dissident identities (Bishop & O'Connor, 2023; Gardner et al., 2024; Melby, 2024; Sirriyeh, 2024). While men debated the political implications of pandemic governance, women activists found themselves performing the practical work of making care function.

Thus, the first night of the Firanda was not just a test of l'Asilo's pandemic governance but a moment in which long-standing structural contradictions surfaced. The responsibility of ensuring compliance fell unevenly on certain individuals, particularly women. Some activists exhausted themselves in the process of maintaining safety, others did not, and the internal fractures within l'Asilo deepened. The crisis made me realize that care, when treated as an innate ethical responsibility rather than a structured practice, could easily become a privilege of those who felt safe enough to disregard it. However, the tensions that emerged from the initial night's shortcomings prompted collective reflection and a rearticulation of care practices. The following evening began with an explicit effort to reorient the community towards more coherent mutual care. Despite a lingering feeling of disillusionment, which was vividly expressed by Pietro in a text message he sent to me in which he stated: "I'm staying home tonight, I lost a bit of faith in humanity yesterday in l'Asilo and I'm sad," I decided to return.

The evening commenced with an address by one of the main Firanda organizers, who framed the necessity of self-managed care in clear political terms:

We say no to care imposed from above, which is control. Yet, our own, interpersonal care is the most important thing. Taking care of the other. We have to do this, to be able to hold this event. We're creating beauty here, but we can't share images because no one is wearing masks, spaces aren't ventilated, people smoke indoors. L'Asilo, especially with this new administration<sup>45</sup>, is in partial danger. The most revolutionary act a person can do is to enjoy their existence and enjoy certain mechanisms.

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<sup>45</sup> In October 2021, a centre-left coalition led by Gaetano Manfredi won the municipal elections, following a decade of left-wing administration sympathetic to the commons movement.

The brief assembly held that evening, just before the Firanda began, functioned less as a space of collective deliberation and more as an effort by organizers to reaffirm previously established principles. Yet remarkably, the event unfolded with an unexpected ease: everyone wore masks, spaces remained well-ventilated, and (if only for a night) *care without control* seemed not just imaginable, but real. Still, not all activists were physically present to witness this moment: while some were actively holding space at l'Asilo, others participated remotely, voicing reflections in the group chat. In digital conversations, tensions re-emerged, because absent comrades engaged in fervent debate, highlighting how divergent experiences (some at a distance) continued to shape the collective process.

Carlotta, who had been consistently critical of the failures in self-managed care, articulated profound frustration and sorrow in the Telegram chat:

In that fu\*\*ing space there is NO ONE with a facemask, not young people nor even people who have been part of the process for years, no one gives a damn. Are we talking about care? What are we talking about? How do we expect those who approach the space to take care to keep their masks on, wash their hands, etc., if those who have been living in the space for years don't give a damn? What has to happen? Is there to be an outbreak? Does there have to be a death? What has to happen for the community to take action? [...] A community I no longer recognise, with great sorrow [broken heart emoji].

Carlotta's reaction was emblematic of broader discontent within the community. She, eventually, left l'Asilo in subsequent months. Gianmarco shared a similar sentiment, and emphasized the contradiction between ideals and practice:

We moved from no Green Pass because it's fascist to no masks at all—what kind of political coherence is this? We agreed on masks, but none of us, neither the care prophet nor the anarcho-individualist, are able to uphold this minimal commitment!

In contrast, Osvaldo defended the community's efforts and reclaimed the value of their experimental approach:

Let's fight against who wants positionings, let's not get fooled, let's invite to exit from binary views, let's keep experimenting.

Meanwhile, a concrete illustration of collective care emerged when it was discovered that one attendee had tested positive for COVID-19 after the first night. Thanks to the previously established protocol of voluntary registration, organizers promptly contacted attendees by SMS:

Hi, this is l'Asilo. Yesterday, Thursday 16 December, one person tested positive for COVID-19 following a rapid swab. She is now awaiting results from a molecular swab, although others in close contact tested negative today. We encourage you all to exercise caution.

This incident highlighted the ambivalence of mutual care practices, which relied on voluntary cooperation and trust while remaining exposed to the uncertainties of a broader public health crisis. The second night of the Firanda thus represents a critical empirical moment, clearly demonstrating the persistent tensions and complexities of spontaneous care. The assembly's explicit reassertion of mutual care principles, alongside ongoing conflicts in digital discussions, underscores the difficult yet necessary shift from spontaneous care towards more structured, deliberative care infrastructuring. Nevertheless, this shift remained partial, contested, and continually negotiated, reflecting broader unresolved contradictions in l'Asilo's approach to radical openness and collective responsibility. In the days following the Firanda, discussions in the Telegram chat became increasingly heated, with some activists questioning whether l'Asilo's model of self-regulation was viable in moments of crisis. The debate was no longer just about Covid—it was about the very foundations of l'Asilo's governance. The pandemic had amplified existing tensions, which would only escalate in the months that followed, evolving into a broader relational crisis.

#### **4. Framed as a Care Crisis: (Post-)Pandemic Relational Conflicts**

As l'Asilo navigated the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, the discourse of care, once mobilized as an alternative to state-sanctioned public health measures, became a framework for making sense of the internal fractures within the community. If, during the pandemic, *cura* was evoked as a political response to external pressures—offering a mutualistic, non-coercive approach to collective health—by the end of 2021, it had evolved into a discourse of internal crisis. Care had come to define the struggles activists faced in maintaining a cohesive, sustainable political community. This moment confirmed the limits of care as an innate ethic, exposing the need for structured mechanisms to sustain collective well-being, manage conflict, and ensure the continuity of the commons.

Alice, one of the activists most attuned to the emotional toll of the pandemic on l'Asilo's members, described in an interview how the long period of isolation and uncertainty had left the collective deeply fragmented. In her words:

Surely two years of pandemic and one year of isolation brought out so much stuff. As well as the many dropouts... [...], at a time of chaos where then at some point, this dispersion... There was a loss, so in my opinion it is also very much dictated by this sense of loss, so then it was... We have clung on to the need to talk about this? [...] In other words, the whole beginning of this year has been overbearing, because there have been moments of disorientation and total bewilderment. I mean, really psychological, of so many people in the community, in my opinion. So, it was necessary at a certain point to call in something, someone... that is, cura... I mean, there was no other solution. If not to get hold of something that at least the community was trying to do, trying to say.... to think about.

Alice's reflection highlights how care, in moments of crisis, becomes a necessary yet contested framework through which activists frame both their exhaustion and their hope for collective renewal. This duality aligns with Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) and Tronto's (2013) framing of care as inherently ambivalent: simultaneously transformative and marked by persistent struggles and uneven burdens. Care is never merely nurturing or harmonious; rather, as Fraser (2016b) further emphasizes, it is deeply embedded within power relations, revealing vulnerabilities, tensions, and the risk of exploitation. L'Asilo's crisis illustrates this clearly: invoking care was both an effort to restore relational coherence and a recognition that previous informal care models disproportionately burdened women with invisible labor. Thus, Alice's articulation underscores care not merely as ethically desirable but as politically complex, in which one is actively negotiating whose vulnerabilities matter, whose labor becomes visible, and whose exhaustion counts.

By mid-December 2021, tensions that had been simmering throughout the year erupted into what many activists perceived as an existential crisis. Some began voicing concerns that l'Asilo's political process had reached an irreversible breaking point. The tension was so high that it was not difficult to believe it: I, myself, had started to think that my thesis could end up becoming an ethnography of inner collapse of urban commons. After all, just a month earlier, l'Asilo's community was shocked to discover that Macao (a sister project in Milan, occupied

almost contemporarily in 2012) had voluntarily left the space due to issues of violence in the space, and references to it were made more than once as a warning of what could happen to us. The Monday assembly that week was more emotionally charged than usual. The meeting, held in the big theatre of the repurposed monastery and widely participated, intended to address routine administrative matters, quickly became a forum for reckoning with the broader dysfunctions of the collective. A core issue raised was the perceived “toxicity of relations” within the space—a phrase that activists used to describe both interpersonal hostilities and deeper structural problems. Some employed the term to refer to specific individuals who were seen as disruptive, while others used it more broadly to critique patterns of exhaustion, miscommunication, and unspoken power dynamics. The ambiguity of the term itself reflected a wider challenge: was the crisis rooted in personal conflicts, or was it symptomatic of an unsustainable governance model?

Why did what was described as “toxicity” in communication at l’Asilo emerge precisely at that historical moment? My sense is that this toxicity reflected, at least partially, a deeper crisis exposed by the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic significantly disrupted social movements, as collective action was either halted or substantially reshaped by health measures and restrictions. Concurrently, many individuals faced heightened struggles with mental health, further complicating interpersonal and collective dynamics. There was a pervasive feeling within l’Asilo that their internal crisis was not isolated; rather, numerous self-managed spaces were experiencing similar relational tensions during this period. Supporting this perception, in December 2021, I received a telling message from a friend involved in activist circles in Barcelona (my other field site) that vividly captured the broader sentiment:

It really seems to me that Covid has brought to light some pretty serious problems in the collectives and movements, really, there is shit floating everywhere you turn! I really struggle to remain optimistic about the capacity of the spaces of resistance, it’s all a f\*\*\*ing shit show. Also [a specific Barcelonian urban commons] is going from bad to worse.

In l’Asilo, the perception was very similar: Covid had somehow revealed all the conflicts, tensions, problems that were already there and had made new ones emerge. An evocative metaphor was developed by Gianmarco during an intervention in the assembly: “The virus in l’Asilo has lowered the level of antibodies, understood in both the literal (virus-related) and the social connotation.” By “antibodies” in this second sense Gianmarco (together with others

who often used this expression) meant that the community had lost its defensive mechanisms against harmful behaviors. In addition to Covid-19 (both in its material and psychological effects), other issues were troubling l'Asilo's activists during this time: the entrance in the space of new subjectivities (kids from the neighborhood and football hooligans, to which chapter 7 is dedicated); the city government's change, the issue of sexism in the space, and others. All of these generated a sense that the community was breaking apart, that nothing was working anymore, that l'Asilo's very existence was in danger.

In a lengthy assembly lasting approximately four hours, numerous concerns were raised. Some participants objected to the tendency of obstructing discussions by adding irrelevant agenda items, while others highlighted confusion surrounding decision-making processes and community representation. Issues related to identity and inclusivity were prominently voiced, emphasizing perceived hierarchical dynamics, non-welcoming attitudes, and difficulties in clearly defining the collective "we." Members also pointed to ongoing problems of exclusivity, marginalization of particular groups or individuals, and resistance to embracing diverse perspectives and backgrounds. Additionally, concerns were expressed regarding a tendency to moralize and individually manage instances of aggressive behavior and verbal violence, rather than addressing them through collective, collaborative approaches.

Amid these tensions, Gianmarco paraphrased the well-known Popper's paradox of tolerance (Popper, 2013), or rather Marcuse's Critique to tolerance (Wolff et al., 1970), to argue that an uncritical commitment to inclusivity could ultimately undermine the space's political integrity. He insisted that "excluding those who are exclusive (because they are violent)<sup>46</sup> can be useful in order not to exclude those who are inclusive." His argument exposed a contradiction at the heart of l'Asilo's governance. Its commitment to radical openness meant that no clear mechanisms really existed to address those who engaged in disruptive or even harmful behavior. Gianmarco's provocation resonated with some activists, who felt that a lack of accountability had allowed a small number of individuals to dominate discussions, creating a hostile environment that drove others away.

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<sup>46</sup> Gianmarco is referring here to verbal violence and aggressive behaviour, which were quite present during this crisis in l'Asilo.

However, others pushed back against his framing, arguing that the distinction between “exclusionary” and “inclusive” actors was itself politically fraught. Who would decide when exclusion was justified, and by what criteria? Some feared that any attempt to formalize exclusion would inevitably reproduce the exclusionary characteristics of the hegemonic society that l’Asilo was experimenting against. The debate that followed did not lead to a clear resolution but reflected a deeper tension: can care be translated into a form of political practice in an urban commons without some form of boundary-making, or is any attempt to regulate participation a betrayal of radical openness? This was just one out of many other instances in which this question, a classic conundrum of commons after all, became central at l’Asilo (see Chapter 7). For the purposes of this chapter, let me turn to the gendered aspects of l’Asilo’s “crisis of care.”

When the assembly resumed, the discussion shifted to episodes of *micromachismo* (“micro-sexism”), verbal insults, and discrimination tied to religion, gender, and profession. Alberta took the floor and recounted how she had become the target of persistent hostility from a male member of the community. In a pattern well-documented in feminist analyses of care and violence, she had initially extended support to him—securing accommodation during a field trip, preparing the space, ensuring he felt welcomed. However, her care, instead of being recognized, was met with claims of exclusion and emotional neglect. This reaction aligns with what feminist scholars describe as the invisibilization and undervaluation of gendered care labor in activist contexts (Bishop & O’Connor, 2023; Gardner et al., 2024). Such reversals, where women’s care is dismissed or seen as inadequate, reflect broader societal scripts in which emotional and relational labor become simultaneously essential and unrecognized (Craddock, 2019).

The situation, painful as it was, followed a familiar pattern: a woman undertaking substantial care labor only to be penalized for failing to meet unarticulated expectations. Such a dynamic, in which care is simultaneously demanded and disregarded, is not merely anecdotal but systemic (Melby, 2024). Women and queer activists often find themselves managing what Duncombe and Marsden (1995) famously termed the “triple shift”: balancing productive, reproductive, and community labor, with emotional care threading through each aspect. Indeed, care encompasses multiple forms (organizational tasks, physical efforts, and emotional support) and frequently falls disproportionately on those already marginalized (Brown & Pickerill, 2009; James, 1992).

Moreover, Alberta's experience exemplifies a broader phenomenon in which women's labor within activist movements (particularly emotional, clerical, and relational roles) is habitually unacknowledged or undervalued. Historically, even progressive or leftist movements have channeled women into auxiliary or supportive roles, allowing men to dominate public-facing leadership positions (Bishop & O'Connor, 2023; Zemlinskaya, 2010). Although recent feminist pressures have challenged and partially transformed this pattern, persistent inequalities remain. My observations at l'Asilo confirmed that women activists typically bear the weight of daily relational tasks, such as coordinating, mediating conflicts, and providing emotional care, without structured recognition or institutional mechanisms for redistributing these burdens equitably (Gorski, 2018; Melby, 2024).

No follow-up came after Alberta spoke. As often happens in large and emotionally charged assemblies, the rigid queue of speakers made responsive dialogue nearly impossible. With ten or more interventions still pending, the conversation drifted. But the temperature in the room did not drop. Guglielmo, an activist from another Neapolitan commons who had sat silently until then, raised his hand. "I'm sorry," he began, "but I have something unpleasant to share." He revealed that he had been mistakenly added to a private chat titled *ci avete rotto i coglioni* ("you've pissed us off"), where a member of l'Asilo, Angelo, had written phrases like "we shall run things under the table." The chat included three or four other members, whose numbers Guglielmo didn't recognize. He felt the assembly needed to be aware of this. The dominant response in the room was one of collective indignation at what was seen as a subversive, anti-democratic maneuver. Yet this did not generate important consequences, and Angelo kept participating in l'Asilo's governance. With everything the community was dealing with, this was probably not given priority because it resembled less a conspiracy than a clumsy, frustrated reaction from someone who felt somewhat marginal in the group and expressed an inelegant venting against the assembly's slow, messy deliberative processes.

The next speaker returned the conversation to the earlier topic. Isabel, the Latin American feminist researcher introduced earlier in the chapter, joined the assembly via video call. Her words acted as an echo and an escalation of Alberta's. With a calm but firm tone, she argued that l'Asilo was far from being a feminist space, and that microsexism, rather than being an exception, was woven into its everyday dynamics. She highlighted how women were systematically expected to take on care roles: not only visible tasks, but also the invisible labor

of “keeping track of things”—of projects, timelines, and deadlines. Alberta, again, was named as someone who carried this mental load without formal acknowledgment.

Isabel’s critique, however, widened the lens. She denounced having been insulted for her Catholic faith, and challenged the caricature of researchers at l’Asilo as “rectors”—a term used pejoratively to accuse some members of exercising undue authority. Most of these so-called “rectors,” she reminded the group, were precarious academics themselves, and for someone like her (a Latin American woman in European academia) that precarity came with particular forms of structural violence. She closed by proposing that the community organize collective moments of self-training around patriarchy, transfeminism, and broader questions of gender and power. Her intervention did not just reiterate Alberta’s earlier points; it situated them within a broader matrix of intersectional inequalities, linking gender, religion, and institutional precarity, to say a few.

The assembly went on. Concerning power dynamics and management, people voiced complains about proprietary tendencies towards space and resources, concentration of power and management by a few, lack of self-management and equal distribution of power. Others denounced personal arbitrariness in judging and addressing violence, a lack of method and reflection in assembly processes, and a failure to address underlying issues, generating anger. If the Monday assembly revealed l’Asilo’s fractures, the days that followed amplified them. The collective’s mailing list and Telegram chat exploded with over 300 emails and 1,000 messages in just a week, turning digital spaces into battlegrounds of frustration, accusations, and existential doubt. Activists who had been struggling with l’Asilo’s internal dysfunction for months now voiced open disillusionment.

As I analyzed in the previous chapter, care was considered as a collective principle and practice that was as much needed as much missing. It was perceived as missing so much to cause, at the end of 2021, the departure of Carlotta and Andrè, who wrote the following farewell message:

Having lost faith in the community and care, we call ourselves out in order to make room for others to take on the roles of “power” and burdens that we have been taking on for years for l’Asilo.

Their withdrawal from the community was explicitly framed as the consequence of a lack of faith in care practices within the collective. The rest of the message also pointed to issues often entangled with care—particularly with the invisible, ongoing labor required to sustain the collective’s infrastructure. These historic activists, among other things accused by others of “holding power,” offered instead a counter-reading of their role: they described themselves as having taken on burdensome, often thankless responsibilities (such as maintaining the digital infrastructure of l’Asilo, offering their personal legal identities for a bank account) not as acts of control, but as forms of invisible care. This dissonance reveals a recurring ambiguity in collective contexts: what some experience as voluntary care work, others perceive as an accumulation of informal power. While their invisible tasks exceed more traditional understandings of care work, it is common for invisible responsibilities in commoning to be framed contemporarily as forms of caring and of holding power, depending on the point of view.

As Kittay (1999, p. 34) notes, care, what she calls “dependency work,” involves an asymmetry: it confers responsibility, and with it, the potential to shape the conditions of others’ participation. This asymmetry is not necessarily domination, but it is power. And when such work is unacknowledged or morally contested—when it is simultaneously relied upon and resented—it places carers in a bind and generate tensions that are difficult to articulate within a horizontalist political grammar. Their very presence becomes overvisible as authority, while their labor remains invisible as care. The departure of these two figures thus cannot be read merely as personal burnout or conflict. It reveals that without collective structures for recognizing, sharing, and politicizing care labor, its practice risks becoming a site of moral ambivalence. The fact that such work can be interpreted either as selfless maintenance or covert control reveals just how unstable the recognition of care remains, and points to the need for care to be rendered infrastructural not only in practice, but in collective consciousness: named, shared, and politicized.

In the concerned, emotionally charged debate that followed their departure, two interconnected fault lines surfaced with particular clarity: the problem of *freeriding* (the perception that some benefited from the commons without contributing to its upkeep), famously theorized by Ostrom and introduced in Chapter 1, and the parallel strain of *self-care* as an exit strategy. These tensions were not new, but they were now articulated with new urgency. Giacomo, one of the activist-researchers at l’Asilo, intervened in the Telegram chat with a message that reframed

the local conflict through the broader lens of resource management and collective action theory. Paraphrasing a famous quote by Che Guevara, he wrote:

I just think that if we really want the impossible, we should be realistic. Without self-management, mere use becomes “freeriding.” It is no coincidence that this word is in every study on collective resources. The problem is also the perceived, but false, freeriding. That is, all those who contribute (from the armory, performing arts, researchers) to the care of the space in various forms, including cleaning, but are perceived as free riders (due to lack of trust, bad climate, invisibility of moments of care, aggressiveness).

His analysis crystallized two critical aspects of the crisis. First, that some genuinely were drawing from the commons without contributing to its sustenance. And second, more insidiously, that much of the labor that kept l’Asilo alive (especially affective, clerical, or infrastructural work) was rendered invisible and thus misread as absence or passivity. The parallel with domestic labor in capitalist economies was not lost on Giacomo: as with housework or emotional maintenance, care at l’Asilo often went unnoticed until its absence became a problem. In a space that formally valorized mutual responsibility, the lack of legibility for certain forms of care became itself a political tension.

While some framed the unfolding crisis as a matter of fairness—who gives, who takes, and who is seen to do so—others interpreted it more existentially. For them, detachment was not an act of refusal, but of survival. Self-care emerged as a political necessity, a means of withdrawing from what was increasingly felt as a toxic, emotionally demanding environment. Gianmarco, returning to earlier debates on the limits of mutual care, offered a sharp diagnosis of the situation:

Trust in the community has failed because the community has not taken care of itself. This is reflected in the care of space. Tepid responses to strong relational problems raise aggressiveness and suspicion and erase beauty, as Mario said. Last week we did beautiful things but in parallel we became intoxicated because, in addition to freeriding (which is why the commons are being studied in the world), there are unresolved wounds and traumas that politically we do not want to resolve. Detachment from an unsafe environment is the first form of self-care. We have arrived at the point where self-care conflicts with crossing the space... This could be the new trauma of this shared history... And this time not because of public grants or plans but only because of our inability to recognize violence and stem it with a strong political stance.

His words gave voice to a growing sentiment: that the absence of shared protocols for dealing with conflict, trauma, and emotional toxicity had made sustained participation untenable. If care was supposed to serve as the community's political infrastructure—its connective tissue and organising principle—then its failure in daily practice meant more than interpersonal disappointment. It meant the commons was losing its capacity to reproduce itself. What was at stake was not simply trust, but viability. In this sense, self-care was no longer just a personal ethic; it became a barometer for the collective's disintegration. As the affective load of participation intensified, and recognition for care work remained uneven, the community itself began to hollow out—not from repression or external pressure, but from an unresolved tension at the heart of its care politics.

## **5. Reframing the Crisis as a Learning Moment: Infrastructuring the Ethics of Care Through Facilitation**

On December 20, just days after the explosive previous assembly and the chaotic debates that followed on digital platforms, the community gathered again to reassess its next steps. The recent departures, and the sharp critiques voiced by Giacomo and Gianmarco in the days prior, had left a sobering impression: care now seemed stretched to its limit—fragile, unevenly distributed, and emotionally exhausting. The December assembly was therefore shaped by a dual urgency: the need to address immediate interpersonal tensions, and the search for collective mechanisms that could sustain care more structurally. Discussions covered multiple layers of conflict: the presence of a hooligan group occupying parts of the building, a homeless person repeatedly sleeping in the space, young neighborhood kids vandalizing parts of l'Asilo (see chapter 7), and, most pressingly, the ongoing interpersonal tensions that had driven away long-standing members. The recent departure of Carlotta and Lou loomed large, serving as a painful reminder of how unresolved conflict was steadily eroding the collective.

Amid this impasse, a new proposal began gaining traction: the idea of holding a grand plenary assembly—a gathering that would bring together as many community members as possible to confront the crisis head-on. The idea was not just to discuss problems but to create a structured space where facilitators could guide the conversation toward tangible resolutions. Osvaldo, still skeptical of whether l'Asilo could recover from its crisis, framed the plenary as a final reckoning:

It would be a case of holding a plenary assembly where we could bring together those in the space, understand the discomforts (net of the collective suffering, both physical and mental, that we are experiencing because of what the pandemic brings, which is no small thing and which affects us in no small measure), whether there really are the 10 rectors, the dissidents, the collectives who look at each other in a scowl, and in the case also consider the possibility of ALL GOING AWAY, I mean it, and put an end to the civic use of the former Asilo Filangieri, no drama for me, it is a relational, human experimentation, and in this era there is evidently no room for this kind of experimentation.

Others, however, saw the plenary as a creative rather than destructive opportunity. Mario, echoing Osvaldo's existential framing, nonetheless suggested that l'Asilo could collectively invent its own ending rather than simply imploding: "I think the most correct action is to invent together, as a last creative act, the end of l'Asilo." Carmen reinforced this sentiment, adding that perhaps the most politically honest action would be to simply return the space to the city: "I made the same proposal. Let us leave and return the keys to the palace. [...] Processes, like love stories, you know, come to an end. Something (besides the poison) hopefully remains within us." Yet, against this backdrop of doubt, Giorgio made a final appeal to perseverance. He cautioned against conflating the crisis with total collapse, reminding activists that l'Asilo had always been an evolving project, shaped by the people who passed through it. The space itself, he argued, was not dependent on any single composition of individuals:

Let us not make the mistake of identifying the process with ourselves. If we review in our minds all those who have left or moved away, it is clear that we are faced with the challenge of finding ways to live up to the crisis we are in, which is a systemic crisis that also goes beyond us who form the transitional community in this composition. Let us also try now. [...] Over the years, we have traced a path and paths attract other wayfarers, and it is up to us not to obstruct the road and to continue "wondering." In Naples we are not the only example and the only practice. Let us not cultivate despair.

In this climate, some activists advocated for an immediate intervention: moderating digital platforms to reduce toxicity and restore a sense of safety in online communication. One activist summarized the dilemma as follows:

We have a problem: we can no longer discuss, because of the insufficiency of the tools we have given ourselves, because there is Covid, etc. The character of this space is not to randomly include people, but to avoid proprietary uses of space. The immediate thing to do is to have a moderation mechanism for the mailing list, a suspension to be able to talk about content.

The first concrete response was a provisional attempt to moderate l'Asilo's digital communication platforms. A small team drafted guidelines for the Telegram chat, with progressive warnings and the possibility of temporarily removing anyone who violated the community's netiquette. Yet, almost immediately, the limitations of this approach became evident. Unlike in more hierarchical organizations, where authority can compel compliance, l'Asilo's horizontal structure left moderators with little leverage. Participation in discussions was fluid and voluntary; policing the space fell to a handful of activists who lacked both the time and the inclination for constant surveillance. Messages spiraled out of control, and within weeks the moderation effort collapsed under its own impracticality.

With informal moderation failing and tensions persisting, some activists began to imagine more deliberate forms of intervention—ones that could structure care without centralizing authority. Giorgio, one of the members most invested in theorizing care, reframed the crisis as a live workshop on care and conflict, a chance to test new approaches to sustaining relationships and explore possible solutions. In his words:

For the next period, I believe that if we also approach this moment as a live workshop on the issues of care and conflict, we might also conclude this journey we are called upon to face with a great wind of restitution so that what we will have learned will serve as a relay for other realities. If we fail, we will have probed and explored a momentary limitation of our own. Perhaps this is how it could work.

Following Giorgio's suggestion, care-centered experimentation began to evolve. Activists increasingly acknowledged that good intentions alone were insufficient; if care was to underpin their commons-based governance, it required more than an implicit ethic—it needed explicit mechanisms for support, redistribution and conflict resolution.

Even Mario, a long-time and deeply respected member of the community as well as a staunch defender of prefigurative spontaneity, recognized this need. In an interview, he first reflected on his commitment to spontaneity and relational ethics:

No objective justifies disregard for practice, relationship, and care. No objective! That is, functionality is not a value. At most, it is a result of a community that works on attention and care. So, shockingly, the results come, but the less you think about them, the more they come.

For Mario, care was not just a means—it was the substance of political life. Even so, in a later moment of the conversation, he acknowledged a shift in perspective:

When you have an unwritten ethic that arises from the practice and informality of the practice, it's a complicated issue to bring it forward over time. Either this energy continues to flow and you have the attention to never take something for granted (and no one can do this) or you have to invent something... Ethics cannot be rules. Ethics either exist or they don't. If they don't exist, perhaps we need those tools that attention has finally focused on in recent years, but the practice still doesn't have them.

This recognition led to a pivotal decision: the collective invited Arabella, a professional feminist facilitator from Rome, to mediate internal conflicts and address burnout. As discussed in Chapter 1, robust conflict-resolution mechanisms are central to Ostrom's design principles (1990), and Bollier and Helfrich recast them as practices of care and repair rather than mere administrative procedures (2019). The plan was ambitious: a full-day facilitated plenary on Saturday followed by an intensive training in facilitation methods on Sunday. For most participants, the move was pragmatic—an attempt to resolve dysfunction and fatigue—but it also marked an implicit rethinking of care as requiring collective organization and shared responsibility.

Jo Freeman's classic essay "The Tyranny of Structurelessness" (1970) warned that abandoning formal rules lets invisible cliques seize control and deepen inequality. Three decades later Francesca Polletta revisited the same problem in *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting* (2004), showing how women organizers relied on friendship to sustain egalitarian practice yet saw those bonds harden into exclusive cores. When activists bolted on mechanical fixes such as the

“disc” and “lot” systems to blunt clique power, those procedures often undermined the trust and mutual learning that friendship had first made possible (Polletta, 2004, pp. 149-175).

L’Asilo’s crisis picks up at precisely this impasse, but it also reframes the question. Instead of asking only who wields decision-making power, activists asked who performs, receives and can rely on care. Rather than installing another mechanical quota, they chose a relational remedy: inviting a feminist facilitator to weave accountability into everyday interaction while deliberately preserving the trust and creativity of prefigurative spontaneity. The experiment resonates with Joan Tronto’s (2013) notion of *caring with*—embedding care in democratic process so that it becomes a collective, accountable practice rather than unpaid, gendered work borne by a few. Facilitation thus became a political intervention that rendered care more visible, shared, distributed, and ultimately political.

On a bright, unseasonably warm Saturday in early January, l’Asilo’s activists gathered on the terraces of the building for what would become a long and introspective assembly. The plenary was not just another meeting; it was designed to be a turning point, a moment of reckoning with the fractures that had emerged over the past year. The presence of Arabella—an outsider, yet someone deeply embedded in feminist movement spaces—added a layer of seriousness to the event. Unlike previous assemblies, which often meandered into unresolved debates, this gathering was facilitated with a clear structure and purpose.

At the outset, Arabella framed the plenary as an opportunity to rethink l’Asilo’s political culture through the lens of care—not as an abstract value but as a structured, institutionalized practice. She introduced the idea that facilitation was not merely a technique but a political commitment, one that sought to transform power dynamics within a collective. As she explained: “Facilitation is a political principle that allows us to trigger a process of transformation of power relations within the community.” To support this intervention, Arabella presented a conceptual model—a triangle representing three core dimensions of collective life: process (the “how”), people and relationships (the “who”), and common objectives and goals (the “what”). Supporting this triangle was a square, representing the four foundational elements necessary to sustain any activist community: emotional management, cohesion, decision-making, and research. Each of these, she argued, was essential not only to maintaining a functional commons, but to enacting care in practice rather than merely invoking it in discourse.

One of the most striking aspects of the plenary was the way care surfaced repeatedly in activists' reflections, not just as a political ideal but as a fundamental issue underlying l'Asilo's ongoing crisis. As discussions unfolded, Arabella created visual summaries of the plenary's key themes (Figures 2, 3, and 4), which provided a striking representation of the different ways activists understood care. The word appeared repeatedly across these summaries, often in relation to tensions around governance, conflict resolution, and burnout.



Figure 5





trying to achieve. *Care of how* focused on internal processes, including decision-making structures and the relationship between the assembly and working groups. Many activists expressed frustration with the inefficiencies of the current model, where decisions were theoretically made by consensus but, in practice, were often dominated by those who spoke the loudest or had the most time to dedicate to meetings. *Care of who* emphasized interpersonal relationships, particularly the emotional labor required to sustain a horizontalist community. This was where the gendered dimensions of care became most apparent. Many women in the plenary pointed out that, while care was frequently discussed, it was rarely distributed evenly. Instead, the responsibility for maintaining relationships, resolving conflicts, and ensuring emotional well-being often fell on a small group of individuals, most of whom were women. Arabella stressed that in order for care to be sustainable, it needed to be somewhat more institutionalized. She proposed that dedicated spaces for care be integrated into l'Asilo's governance structure—for example, setting aside a portion of each assembly specifically for emotional check-ins, or establishing external care spaces where activists could seek mediation for interpersonal conflicts. In her own report, she suggested:

The assembly and each working group can decide that every first Monday of the month, a part of the assembly/working group is dedicated to having a space for caring, where the personal and emotional plan with which we cross, participate and are in the community is shared. Here, newly opened conflicts, modes of interaction and relationships can be addressed with the aim of ensuring a safe space for sharing in the care space and in l'Asilo as a whole. And, if the community is particularly fatigued, it can ask external figures to run care spaces or emotional management spaces, using specific methodologies.

As part of the broader facilitation process, the following day was dedicated to training activists in facilitation techniques, ensuring that the knowledge introduced in the plenary could be embedded into l'Asilo's ongoing practice. This session was particularly well attended—a sign that many activists saw facilitation not as an external imposition but as a necessary skill to navigate the tensions within the space. While the plenary and facilitation training provided an immediate space for reflection, they also raised a fundamental question: how could the community move beyond crisis management and toward a sustainable practice of care? The introduction of facilitation was a first step, but it became clear that deeper self-examination was needed to fully understand the fractures within l'Asilo. If care was to be restructured rather

than assumed, activists needed a clearer picture of where it was failing, how it was distributed, and what interventions could make it more effective.

This realization led to the design of a participatory survey, an initiative that sought to translate the discussions of the plenary into concrete data about the state of l'Asilo's internal relationships. Unlike traditional surveys, this one was built collectively, ensuring that the questions reflected the concerns and priorities of the activists themselves. It was intended to capture how activists understood the current crisis, how they perceived care within the community, and what changes they believed were necessary. Designed as both a research tool and a self-reflexive exercise, the survey aimed to map the lived experiences of care, participation, and conflict within the space. But beyond simply diagnosing problems, it was also an attempt to institutionalize a new mode of collective inquiry—one where activists could systematically assess their own political practices rather than relying on implicit assumptions.<sup>47</sup>

The participatory survey became a pivotal moment in l'Asilo's ongoing attempt to transform care from a spontaneous ethos into an infrastructured political practice. As the collective grappled with persistent relational crises and fractures, activists recognized that merely invoking care was insufficient; they needed a more structured mechanism for understanding and addressing their internal dynamics. The survey's co-creation process was itself a political enactment of the theoretical commitments outlined above. Rather than relying on a predetermined research design, the survey was collaboratively built, echoing feminist methodological practices that value collective participation, reflexivity, and the explicit visibility of relational labor (Haraway, 1988; Linabary & Hamel, 2017). Its collaborative nature exemplified l'Asilo's commitment to horizontality, reflecting the prefigurative ideal of embodying democratic values in everyday research practices (Maeckelbergh, 2011a).

Bianca, a community psychologist who had recently joined l'Asilo, and I, offered our expertise to lead the development and the analysis of the survey. The latter was disseminated through multiple channels (mailing lists, Telegram chats, and even QR codes posted throughout the space) to encourage wide participation. In total, 48 activists completed the survey, providing a diverse range of responses that highlighted both common frustrations and points of divergence.

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<sup>47</sup> More on the participatory survey, from a methodological point of view, can be found in chapter 2, where this dissertation's methodology is laid out.

The respondents represented a diverse range of activists with regards to their degree of participation in decision-making moments—one of the reasons for tensions (16.7% did not participate in assemblies, 20.8% participated only a few times per year, 31.3% a few times per month, and 31.3% attended regularly). Because of the participatory nature of the survey—built collectively and used more as a tool by and for the community than as an external research instrument—it contained an unusually high proportion of open-ended questions (18 out of 28). This resulted in 864 open responses to be qualitatively analyzed.

To make the survey results understandable both to myself and the community, I used the software MAXQDA to code and categorize the open answers.<sup>48</sup> In this way, in May 2022, I was able to visually present the results to the assembly, linking closed questions to open-ended ones.<sup>49</sup> For example, regarding the frequency of participation mentioned above, 46.7% of those attending every Monday cited care for the process and continuity as their main motivation, and the same percentage referred to the assembly as the site of political discussions and decisions. While l'Asilo's assemblies were theoretically open to all, the survey revealed that 52.1% of respondents were attending less frequently than before. When asked to explain why, among those who now participated less, 44% mentioned something related to tensions, violence, and aggressiveness; 28% pointed to personal and work commitments; 20% cited repetitiveness and boredom; and 4% referred to emotional wounds. These findings underscored a disconnect between the ideal of openness and the actual experience of participation, where exhaustion, conflict, and a lack of structure often drove people away.

Similar questions were asked regarding digital communication. When asked to evaluate l'Asilo's digital spaces—particularly the mailing list and Telegram chat—responses overwhelmingly described them as toxic, violent, or confusing. 40% explicitly mentioned hostility and personal conflicts, while 31.4% cited confusion and lack of effectiveness, and 25.7% called for some form of moderation. These responses aligned with observations made in previous assemblies, reinforcing the argument that the absence of structured facilitation in digital communication was exacerbating, rather than resolving, internal tensions. This finding was particularly significant because digital platforms had taken on an outsized role in decision-

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<sup>48</sup> Bianca, parallelly, made her own analysis employing the tools of community psychology, and argued that l'Asilo had entered a vicious circle of lack of trust.

<sup>49</sup> Figure 4 gathers some of the slides I presented that day.

making during the pandemic. Without a structured means of facilitating discussion, these spaces had often become arenas for unchecked conflict, misinterpretation, and passive-aggressive power struggles.

Perhaps most revealing were the survey's insights into how care was perceived and practiced within the community. The results highlighted striking internal contradictions between care as an aspirational value and as a practical reality at l'Asilo. Most respondents expressed strong support for care as a foundational political practice—echoing phrases like “l'Asilo IS care for relationships”—but simultaneously described its practical failures: assemblies were experienced as exhausting, repetitive, and emotionally draining, often exclusionary in practice despite being framed as inclusive in theory. When asked whether care was an important political practice, 38 activists affirmed its centrality, while a small but vocal minority dismissed it as irrelevant or even counterproductive. Many respondents agreed that there was not enough care in the space, citing the prevalence of violence and conflict, and arguing that care needed to be practical rather than discursive. Some pointed out that the “how” was more important than the “what” or “who,” while others noted that the key issue was not only political but also interpersonal and sociocultural.

The contradictions were vividly expressed in two contrasting responses. One respondent wrote, “Although it's a failing one, care is really the new frontier of l'Asilo's experimentation.” Another responded more critically: “L'Asilo should not be a community psychology circle.” Still others responded bluntly: “I have other problems.” These statements reflected a deep tension within the collective—between those who saw care as a necessary precondition for political work, and those who saw it as an unnecessary burden or even a diversion. The participatory survey was not simply a research exercise—it was meant to inform the next phase of l'Asilo's political experiment. By revealing both the strengths and failures of care within the space, it offered a roadmap for activists seeking to move beyond crisis management and toward a more sustainable practice of collective care. As Giorgio reflected in an interview, the survey presentation “short-circuited the vicious circle by giving visibility to those who felt invisible and by providing the external gaze we desperately needed,” opening a space in which the assembly could move beyond the binary question of “who is right and who is wrong.” In this sense, the survey was not merely diagnostic; it became an active intervention in restructuring l'Asilo's political practice.



Figure 8: Some of the slides summarizing the results, presented to the assembly in late May 2022.

As Bianca and I presented the results to the assembly in late May 2022, Arabella, the feminist facilitator who had guided previous discussions, posed a crucial question:

How do we re-appropriate the shared semantics and practice of care after this pandemic time that has made the term so overused? Many different ideas on the nature of care emerge from this survey, but how do we transform them into practice?

After all this process, the community clearly had not developed a definite answer to this question, yet the very introduction of feminist facilitation to the space and the development of the participatory survey—and the constant “walking by asking”, to cite the Zapatistas—were essential part of the process of what I called deliberate care infrastructuring. The empirical episodes examined in depth in this chapter concretely illustrate how activists at l’Asilo began to translate their discursive and ethical commitments around care into more tangible, though still experimental and tentative, infrastructural mechanisms. The Firanda made visible the urgent necessity of moving beyond spontaneous mutualism toward more deliberate and structured approaches to care, as activists grappled directly with contradictions that emerged when ethical aspirations confronted everyday practice. Meanwhile, the external facilitation and the participatory survey represented an intentional, structured intervention aimed at systematically mapping and addressing the internal dynamics and relational fractures within the collective.

Yet, both episodes also underscore the inherent difficulties of this transition. The shift toward deliberative care infrastructuring was always partial, contested, and continuously renegotiated, highlighting the persistent tension between sustaining care and preserving the radical openness central to l’Asilo’s identity. These moments thus encapsulate the complexity and ambivalence of embedding care into the material, relational, and procedural infrastructures of the commons.

## **6. Conclusion**

This chapter has traced how care, that was initially embraced at l’Asilo as an ethical imperative and mutualist principle, gradually evolved into a contested terrain that demanded structured political and organizational intervention. The crises that unfolded during and after the Covid-19 pandemic forced a collective reckoning: what was at stake was not only the failure of care in practice, but the inadequacy of spontaneity as a sustaining political logic. The pandemic intensified existing contradictions, revealing how unstructured mutual care could inadvertently reproduce the very exclusions it sought to prevent. Activists’ rejection of state-imposed measures reflected a principled commitment to autonomy, yet the Firanda incident exposed the limits of voluntarism. In the absence of shared accountability mechanisms, care responsibilities

fell unevenly (often along gendered lines) disproportionately burdening those most vulnerable. An ethics of care, when left informal and unstructured, proved incapable of ensuring equity.

This realization extended beyond the pandemic. As burnout deepened and internal fractures widened, many began to frame the situation not as a crisis of individuals but as a systemic failure of care. In response, a set of structured interventions (including feminist facilitation and a participatory survey) emerged not as bureaucratic impositions but as tools for redistributing relational labor and institutionalizing care without sacrificing horizontality. The crisis confronted activists with the limits of spontaneous care. What had long functioned as an invisible relational infrastructure, what Star and Ruhleder (1996) describe as infrastructure that recedes into the background, now surfaced through its breakdown. In this moment of rupture, activists began to construct intentional, non-coercive infrastructures to sustain care while remaining true to their prefigurative principles. I have called this process *Deliberative care infrastructuring*: the experimental and collective effort to embed care into governance, not through top-down regulation, but as a flexible, emerging process to visualize and center vulnerabilities, mutual dependencies, and various kinds of care labor.

This shift was not a wholesale rejection of radical openness, but a practical adaptation. If care was to be genuinely mutual, it had to be made visible and collectively accountable. By doing so, activists complicated (to some degree, inadvertently) both romanticized visions of spontaneism and naïve assumptions that care is inherently nurturing or harmonious. Care, as shown here, is an ambivalent, politically negotiated terrain structured by affective economies, power dynamics, and uneven labor.

More broadly, this chapter also offers an everyday, granular view into how urban commons movements (and social movement actors more generally) can come perilously close to collapse. Interpersonal tensions, unstructured care, and the invisibilisation of relational labor can wear down even the most vibrant spaces of collective imagination. And yet, what we witness here is also a kind of political intelligence: a capacity to learn from breakdown, to reimagine care not as something soft or intuitive, but as something that requires deliberate, shared infrastructures. These forms of learning do not emerge in moments of clarity, but in the mess of crises, and fatigue.

Despite standing on the brink of collapse in those years, l'Asilo is still alive. Still contradictory, still imperfect, it remains a site of commoning and resistance held together by experimentation, impermanence, and interdependence. Its survival is not a story of triumph, but of continuity: the quiet endurance of a space that refuses to give up on itself, even when the tools feel inadequate and the path uncertain. These reflections set the stage for the next chapter, which shifts from the single case of l'Asilo to the comparison with Àgora, an urban commons in Barcelona. I will show how care and decision-making are structured differently depending on activists' class positions and material conditions. At l'Asilo, care emerged as a deliberative ideal—foregrounded and formalized through explicit processes. At Àgora, by contrast, care was embedded more silently in material labor and everyday support practices, bypassing structured deliberation altogether.

This comparative lens will deepen the argument that *deliberative care infrastructuring* is shaped not only by political ideals, but by the broader socioeconomic terrain within which commons operate. If l'Asilo struggled with the contradictions of formalizing care without formalizing power, Àgora's case invites us to ask what happens when care is enacted without ever becoming a formal object of discourse. Through this juxtaposition, we can refine our understanding of how radical commons navigate the enduring tensions between openness and structure, autonomy and accountability, spontaneity and institution.

## Chapter 6

### Unspoken Care? How Class Shapes Care In Urban Commons

*You know, the problem of l'Asilo is that there are too many activists with a degree*

Anonymous Neapolitan activist

#### 1. Introduction

The first step in answering the central research question of this thesis was to examine how care circulates through language. Then, in Chapter 5, I traced how care at l'Asilo evolved from an ethical aspiration into a contested terrain, eventually prompting (infra-)structured political and organizational responses. Activists' attempts to articulate care often clashed with its uneven distribution in practice, particularly in the wake of crisis. What emerged was not a rejection of horizontality, but a collective effort to reimagine care as something that could be gradually and flexibly infrastructured without strict roles and rules. I termed this process deliberative care infrastructuring.

This chapter builds on that foundation by shifting a step more from discourse to practice, as well as from a single case study to a comparative ethnographic lens. It explores how care is enacted, embodied, and made politically consequential in different ways across two urban commons: l'Asilo and Àgora. If Chapter 5 examined how the breakdown of spontaneous care prompted structured interventions in l'Asilo, this chapter compares l'Asilo to Àgora, where care is practiced without ever being named as an explicit ideal, and how these divergent patterns are shaped by activists' class positions.

L'Asilo and Àgora's contrasting care practices reflect not only divergent political cultures, but also the classed dispositions of their participants. It is an ethnographic comparison designed to explore how class shapes the enactment and recognition of care within radically democratic settings. To interpret this contrast, I define class as a relational social position shaped by unequal configurations of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital. Class is not only about material conditions but also about moral economies: it structures how individuals act, what they value, and how they are valued. This approach draws on Bourdieu's notion of habitus (1987), Skeggs' account of value hierarchies (1997, 2011), and Graeber's theory of value (2001) to foreground how class informs both what people do and how those practices are

socially recognized or dismissed (see Chapter 1). This framework informs my analysis of how care is distributed, legitimized, and often invisibilised, depending on who performs it, how, and under what normative expectations.

While l'Asilo places strong emphasis on assemblies, consensus, and formal participation, Àgora operates through direct, embodied, and often unspoken acts of maintenance, negotiation, and interpersonal support. Both spaces struggle with the challenges of care and democracy, but do so in ways that reflect not only different political cultures, but different classed experiences and sensibilities. The key claim of this chapter is that class backgrounds (understood relationally and intersectionally) profoundly shape how care and democracy are practiced in commons: class positions influence not only who participates, but how care is enacted, recognized, and distributed. This chapter continues the broader inquiry of this thesis by showing that care in commons movements is a material and relational practice embedded in social hierarchies and contested infrastructures.

The chapter unfolds in five parts. It begins by situating class within social movement scholarship and introduces the conceptual framework that guides the analysis. Section 2 explores l'Asilo's deliberative model and its classed dynamics of participation, performance, and exclusion. Section 3 turns to Àgora, where care is embedded in practical labor and face-to-face negotiation, often without discursive elaboration. Section 4 compares the two cases in terms of how class shapes care infrastructures. Section 5 concludes by reflecting on the broader implications for care democracy, including its structural limits and prefigurative tensions.

## **2. Bridging Class Dynamics And Meetings In Social Movements**

To understand how care is differently enacted and recognized in l'Asilo and Àgora, an exploration of how varying class origins mold the everyday practices and cultures of participation inside commons is essential. While both spaces commit to self-management and horizontality, they differ sharply in the enactment of these ideals, and particularly in how care is performed, articulated, or assigned. This chapter argues that these divergences arise less from political ideals, spatial arrangements, or organizational models than from the class-inflected dispositions, expectations, and value orientations that participants bring with them, with class frequently entangled with processes of racialization in important ways.

L'Asilo is a large sixteenth-century building, recognized (in a peculiar way) by the local administration and self-managed by a predominantly middle-class community of artists and cultural workers. Àgora, by contrast, is a squatted, self-managed urban garden maintained primarily by members of the migrant sub-proletariat that constitute a large part of the neighborhood, a class position that is often racialized in practice. Although both spaces embody the ideals of the commons, the way care is enacted, through speech, silence, maintenance, or deliberation, differs fundamentally. The variable that most clearly accounts for these divergences is not mainly geography, culture, or formal ideology, but the class composition and habitus of their participants. Research on commons governance shows that socioeconomic inequalities often translate into patterned participation and benefit appropriation (commonly termed “elite capture”) where better-resourced actors shape rules, representation, and distribution unless countervailing safeguards are in place (Platteau, 2004).

Scholarship on social movements has explored how gender and race dynamics connected to entrenched power hierarchies from the wider society often pervades social movements even when organizers embrace horizontal structures and claim broad inclusivity. Women, as well as racialized minorities, often remain marginalized and find their perspectives excluded from key decisions (Athanasiou, 2014; Campbell, 2011; Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015; Gámez Fuentes, 2015; Potuoğlu-Cook, 2015). Occupy, for instance, was widely hailed for “giving voice” to marginalized communities (Vallee, 2017), yet studies have documented ongoing white privilege (Campbell, 2011), and more specifically the sidelining of African American and Latino voices in Occupy Wall Street (Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2015), and parallel problems in Occupy London (Ishkanian & Ali, 2018). Moreover, these challenges are not unique to Occupy: researchers have also highlighted constraints on women’s participation in Tahrir Square (Tadros, 2015), the silencing of women’s demands in Spain’s 15M (Gámez Fuentes, 2015; Martínez Palacios, 2016), and similar exclusionary practices at Gezi Park (Potuoğlu-Cook, 2015).

Yet we know way less about the role played by class in this sense, perhaps because “within the contemporary Left, neither activists nor academics are allowed to attribute class to subjects the way we are currently allowed to attribute races and genders” (Lagalis, 2016, p. 338). While social movement scholarship has long addressed class in structural or demographic terms, its symbolic, moral, and affective dimensions remain underexplored. This neglect is not only academic: it mirrors a broader silence within movements themselves. As Leondar-Wright

(2013) and working-class writers like Erica Lagalisie and D. Hunter have shown, many radical groups readily apply intersectional analysis to race, gender, and sexuality, but struggle to name class-based exclusions (Hunter, 2017, 2020; Lagalisie, 2024). In the UK context, Evans (2017, p. 67) observes that despite the rhetorical embrace of intersectionality, “little attention is paid to class.” D. Hunter (2020), in an auto-ethnographic account of squatting, notes that squatters are often treated as politically equivalent regardless of whether they own property or expect to inherit wealth. This symbolic flattening obscures internal hierarchies of privilege. As Lagalisie (2016) adds, survival practices like squatting or stealing may even be seen by activists as less legitimate than when performed for explicitly political reasons, a dynamic that reveals the (ultimately classist) moral economy at play. Lagalisie’s ethnography of anarchist movements in North America offers a detailed exploration of these class-based dilemmas and will serve as a key reference in this chapter (Lagalisie, 2016, 2024). While rooted in a different geographical context, her analysis resonates strongly with the autonomous and left-libertarian urban commons movements I participated in in Southern Europe.

At l’Asilo, care tends to be institutionalized, discussed, and symbolically valorized, but its legitimate enactment often depends on discursive fluency, emotional restraint, and procedural composure. Dispositions that are more accessible to those with middle-class cultural capital. At Àgora, by contrast, care is expressed through bodily maintenance, spontaneous solidarity, and mundane acts of support: silent yet indispensable, and often unrecognized by dominant norms of legitimacy. In both spaces, care is political, but the criteria for what counts as “good care” are classed. These differences reflect two contrasting models of care governance that I conceptualize as discursive and embodied care infrastructures. At l’Asilo, care is made visible through speech, deliberation, and symbolic recognition, structured by participatory protocols and consensus cultures. At Àgora, care takes shape through material maintenance, affective presence, and informal mutual aid, largely without discursive framing or institutional scaffolding. These typologies will guide the comparative analysis that follows.

Care thus becomes a battleground, and a matter of power relations in commoning (Velicu & García-López, 2018), for personhood and political recognition: who is seen as “protagonistic,” who speaks with authority, and whose labor disappears into the background infrastructure. As Skeggs (2003) argues, the figure of the proper person, one who can participate confidently and be seen as valuable, is not neutral. It is the product of long histories of gendered, racialized, and classed exclusion, sedimented through what she calls the social contract of value. Lagalisie

(2016) extends this point by showing that the working class is excluded not only economically, but it is also affectively and epistemologically unable to consistently perform the “possessive individualism” expected in spaces where legitimacy can depend on convincingly narrating one’s suffering or claiming care as a right.

Indeed, as Lagalisie provocatively notes, working-class identity resists reification. Its political logic is not affirmation, but abolition. “If class is particular,” she writes, “it is not because the ‘working class’ uniquely seeks to annihilate its other, but because it alone seeks to annihilate itself” (2022, p. 741). This helps explain why, in activist spaces where care is increasingly mediated through moral discourse, language, and regimes of recognition, certain forms of care (especially those shaped by necessity) remain not only unspoken but structurally unspeakable. This understanding of class helps illuminate why certain forms of care and participation are valorized, while others remain invisible, dismissed, or misunderstood. Rather than presuming a resurgence of class consciousness grounded in overt self-identification, I analyze the subterranean grammars of class as they materialize in the quotidian life of the commons: namely, in whose voices are heard, who is accredited with caring labor, and the affective atmospheres and aesthetic registers through which these relations are sensed and styled.

Having clarified how I conceptualize class, it is important to acknowledge my own positionality within this structure. While a complete reflection on my positionality can be found in Chapter 2, this chapter requires a further brief acknowledgment, nonetheless. I embody the historically and presently dominant social identity: highly educated, middle class, white, cis, heterosexual, able-bodied, male. From a feminist standpoint theory perspective, these privileges limit my ability to perceive certain dynamics of oppression. However, I believe that privilege is most problematic when the researcher assumes, often implicitly, that his perspective is universal and objective. It is a different thing to actively question, deconstruct, and seek to learn from other standpoints. By striving to engage in the latter epistemological practice, I hope to produce insights that, while informed by my positionality, remain critically self-aware and reflective of broader dynamics.

Before turning to the empirical sections, I now focus on one particularly revealing site where these classed dynamics unfold: assemblies and meetings. Specifically, I show how these are significantly shaped by class—in intersection with other cultural factors. Social Movement Studies have sporadically engaged with the democratic practices of social movements, though

notable exceptions exist (Epstein, 1993; Polletta, 2004; Leach, 2016; della Porta, 2009a, 2009b; della Porta & Rucht, 2013). Assemblies and meetings, despite their centrality to movement life, have been studied to a limited extent (Haug & Teune, 2008; Maeckelbergh, 2012; Blee, 2013; della Porta & Rucht, 2013; Boni, 2015). Yet these gatherings are critical sites for understanding movement dynamics, particularly through ethnographic engagement. Assemblies offer a window into power relations, cultural codes, and how identities and class positions influence decision-making processes.

Common to left-libertarian movements and commons is to take decisions by “consensus”, which is often seen as part of their prefigurative strategies (Maeckelbergh, 2012; Piazza, 2013; Yates, 2015a). As I show, l’Asilo is a case in point, while Àgora’s decision-making results as a bit less straightforward. Various aspects of consensus decision-making or “consensus process” (Lagalis, 2024) have been widely debated in democratic theory and social movement studies (Juris, 2008; Polletta, 2005; Graeber, 2010, 2013b; della Porta & Rucht, 2013). The premise of consensus decision-making is that majority voting is inherently violent by imposing decisions on even the smallest disagreeing minority. Hence, the assembly or community in question strives for achieving a decision that perhaps not everyone agrees with, but that at least everyone can live with. If, for someone, a specific proposal is unacceptable, they can exercise a veto, which leads to a reworking of the proposal until everyone does not oppose it as strongly as to veto it. While specific techniques, variations, and exceptions are constantly subject to innovation by both social movements and scholars of participatory and deliberative democracy, the basic scheme outlined above remains valid and is enough for this discussion. Building on two basic dimensions *participation versus delegation*, and *deliberation versus majority vote*, Della Porta and Rucht (2013) look at different modalities of decision-making in the Global Justice Movement and present four possible combinations of decision-making models, which can be used to analyze decision-making across a wide range of social movements. The model of *deliberative participation*, with an absence of delegation combined with the consensus principle, is clearly the one of l’Asilo.

Some have argued that consensus decision-making broadly understood is far from a modern innovation. It has long served as a foundational political practice across pre-colonial Indigenous communities at multiple latitudes (Graeber, 2004; Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). In this light, it offers a more genuinely democratic alternative to the Ancient Greek model from which the term “democracy” derives—one historically premised on majority rule among male

slaveholders (Graeber, 2007b). More recently, consensus has been adopted, reinterpreted, and refined by the Global Justice Movement at the turn of the millennium (della Porta, 2009a; della Porta & Rucht, 2013), shaped by both anarchist political imaginaries and Indigenous inspirations such as the Zapatistas. Indeed, scholars have pointed to the growing centrality of anarchist principles to post-1999 movements, especially their commitment to non-hierarchical, participatory forms of decision-making (Graeber, 2002, 2010; Juris & Khasnabish, 2013; Maeckelbergh, 2009). This legacy was central to the anti-austerity protests and the movement of the squares, where participatory or “real” democracy emerged as a core demand (della Porta, 2019). It is in this context that l’Asilo was born, and where the commons frame gained particular traction across parts of Southern Europe (Varvarousis et al., 2021).

Recent anthropological work has emphasized the cultural embeddedness and performative dynamics of consensus. Lagalisie’s ethnography, for instance, focuses “on how features of ‘consensus process’ interact with local cultural codes, styles of speech, body language and emotional expression, unspoken rules about eye contact and laughter, place-based ideas around whose voice(s) matter more, and even culturally distinct notions around what counts as ‘agreement’” (2024, p. 77). My analysis resonates with this approach. Despite the widespread diffusion of consensus practices across anarchist, libertarian-leaning, and commons-based movements, there is, as Lagalisie wryly observes, “no global, cross-cultural consensus on consensus” (2024, p. 77).

What this means is that consensus does not unfold in a vacuum. As other scholars have shown, consensus protocols may rely on formalized signals—such as the wavy fingers or “C” shapes observed by Graeber (2010), Maeckelbergh (2009), and Lagalisie (2024)—but these symbols operate within distinct emotional and rhetorical registers. In Mexico, for example, dissent might be expressed through groans, frowns, or headshakes (Lagalisie, 2016, 2024), in contrast to the more codified and restrained expressions common in North American assemblies. Movements in Southern Europe tend to hybridize these modes, blending structured deliberation with more expressive and interruptive styles of interaction. In my fieldwork, loud discussions, emphatic gestures, and spontaneous emotional interventions often coexist (sometimes uneasily) with formal consensus mechanisms shaped by transnational activist circuits.

This friction, I argue following Lagalisie, is not merely cultural, but also classed. The bodily and discursive performances that are seen as legitimate within consensus processes often reflect

middle-class dispositions: composure, patience, rhetorical fluency, and a capacity to bracket urgency in the name of deliberation. By contrast, more expressive, affectively charged, or less verbally polished interventions may be perceived as disruptive, irrational, or immature. While consensus aspires to inclusivity, its operationalization often hinges on unspoken norms of comportment: norms that reproduce broader moral economies of legitimacy. In this sense, consensus becomes a prism through which classed personhood is staged, judged, and sometimes excluded.

As I will show in the following sections, these dynamics manifest differently at l'Asilo and Àgora, two commons whose care practices are shaped not only by different meeting cultures, but by distinct classed infrastructures of care. At l'Asilo, care is often discursively articulated, symbolically valorized, and institutionalized through deliberative processes, what I suggest to call a *discursive care infrastructure*. At Àgora, care is largely embodied, enacted through everyday labor and presence, a form of *embodied care infrastructure* that resists codification but sustains the commons in practice. By reading consensus and participation through this lens, class can be seen as shaping not only who speaks, but what counts as care, and who gets to be recognized as caring.

### **3. The Theatre of Democracy: Consensus Culture and Class in l'Asilo Assemblies**

Since its founding in 2012, l'Asilo has aimed to create a decision-making process rooted in its vision of an urban commons: an inclusive structure free from hierarchies and managed through participatory democracy. The principle of “hegemony of non-hegemony,” a concept developed within l'Asilo and the Neapolitan commons movement, served as a guide. A first clear expressions of this commitment emerged when the artist collective *La Balena* that initially occupied the space in 2012 made a crucial decision: to dissolve to prevent itself or any single group from exerting control. After extensive deliberation, the collective relinquished its leadership role, shifting decision-making power to a weekly open assembly where all participants could contribute equally. This move was intended to ensure that l'Asilo remained a truly democratic, horizontal space for commoning. And in order to strive for this, they decided, decisions would be made by consensus.

Since then, assemblies at l'Asilo take place, without exceptions, every Monday night. Yet, their location is not fixed, as it depends on factors such as the weather or the availability of certain

spaces. Those who arrive first usually decide where the assembly will be held: options include the cinema (a former chapel), the *portici* (porches) in the courtyard, the theatre upstairs, or the terrace outside *armeria* (“amoury”, this is how activists call the manual laboratory for arts and crafts in l’Asilo). Generally, the weather plays the largest role in the decision, with outdoor spaces chosen in fair weather and indoor ones when it is colder or rainy. However, the location is not tied to a strict rule—it can remain consistent for months until someone suggests a change, after which a new location may become the regular meeting spot for a period.

Despite these shifts in location, one feature remains constant: the seating arrangement in a circle (despite the latter being subject to different degrees of deformation). This arrangement is most easily achieved in the theatre, where the open space and movable chairs allow for a nearly perfect circle. In contrast, forming a circle in the cinema is more complicated. Pews from the chapel era have been modified with wheels to allow for greater flexibility, but they still limit how the space can be reconfigured. Typically, the front four rows are arranged in a circle near the altar, leaving the remaining rows untouched. Latecomers often have to sit in these back rows, which places them outside the circle and creates a dynamic where they are less involved, resembling spectators rather than active participants.

During my time at l’Asilo, the Covid-19 pandemic influenced how assemblies were held, introducing a hybrid format to accommodate remote participation. A chair was placed in the middle of the circle to hold a microphone (ironically referred to as the “UFO” by activists due to its distinctive design) and sometimes a camera, although the camera was used less frequently over time. A second chair next to this setup served as the designated spot for speakers, ensuring they could be clearly heard by everyone in the room and those attending remotely. Occasionally, a directional microphone was added if someone from the *tavolo infrasuoni* (infrasound table) working group took the initiative, but this was not a regular practice. The hybrid format, however, was often a source of frustration. Communication between in-person and remote participants was challenging, with those attending online struggling to fully engage in the discussion. This disparity made it difficult to ensure equal participation, and the system, while helpful during the pandemic, was generally seen as imperfect and inefficient.

L’Asilo assemblies were originally intended to alternate between two distinct formats: “management” assemblies, which focused on practical matters such as external proposals for space use, events, and logistical issues, and “political direction” assemblies, dedicated to

broad and more conceptual political discussions. However, in practice, this alternation rarely followed a structured pattern and became quite irregular over time. The agenda for each assembly is maintained in a shared online Google Document, accessible through a pinned message in the main Telegram chat. This setup allows anyone in the community to view and contribute to the agenda by adding points they wish to discuss. The agenda operates on a first-come, first-served basis: topics added earlier are placed higher on the list and tend to be addressed first. If time runs out before all items on the list are discussed, the remaining points are carried over to the next assembly, starting at the top of the agenda for the following week. In practice, however, the order of discussion is not entirely fixed. Facilitators often intervene to propose adjustments during the assembly, prioritizing more urgent items, such as an upcoming event or a proposal for the next week. As a result, less time-sensitive points, like long-term political discussions (a collective debate on the war in Ukraine, for example) are repeatedly postponed in favor of more immediate concerns. This dynamic creates a tendency for certain agenda items, especially those deemed less urgent, to be deprioritized indefinitely, making it difficult to address deeper or less pressing issues.

It was originally proposed to dedicate every other meeting to deeper political discussions precisely to counterbalance the increasingly operational focus of the assemblies. This was meant to safeguard the political nature of the space and avoid the risk of reducing the assembly to merely a logistical body, concerned only with offering free space to artists, theater companies, musicians, associations, and collectives. Activists referred to this potential pitfall as the “services hub” (*centro servizi*) risk. The phrase was often used to critique or push back against this dynamic, sometimes even as a rhetorical weapon: “The way you’re using the space turns l’Asilo into a mere *centro servizi*!” someone might say during a heated discussion. This concern was not unwarranted. On certain Mondays, the assembly agenda could include up to 20 external proposals, alongside prolonged debates over issues like vandalism in the space or negotiations with the city administration. The sheer volume of topics often felt overwhelming. In these situations, the assembly would partially deliberate on concrete proposals and then delegate finer details to specific working groups, or *tavoli*. For instance, if a theater company proposed to rehearse at l’Asilo, the assembly would typically review the proposal, but the *tavolo arti della scena* (the “scenic arts” table) would handle the specifics. Both the assembly and the working groups shared a critical task: scheduling. Decisions about the use of l’Asilo’s spaces needed to be entered into an elaborate shared Google Sheet, designed to coordinate the calendar for various areas like the theater, the *refettorio* (the old dining hall now turned into a

rehearsal room), or the cinema. The sheet was a carefully maintained system, complete with color codes and detailed notes, reflecting the collaborative yet intricate nature of managing a big urban commons like l'Asilo.

Sometimes calls for more decentralization were voiced: *tavoli* could take more care of proposals so that the big assembly could dedicate itself to a more political and a less managerial role, someone would occasionally argue. Indeed, most other self-managed spaces, or commons, in my experience, have a more decentralized structure after all. Yet most of l'Asilo's activists cared too much about internal interdependency, and in passing each single proposal through the general assembly saw precisely the means to keep everything interconnected, political, and ultimately prefigurative and utopic. Each proposal was taken very carefully, scrutinized by the assembly in many different ways and by many different people. There was usually a common understanding, which clearly had been built over time, of what the general problems were within each external proposal, which nonetheless never got rejected nor approved quickly in any case. The position always seemed to be: let's discuss it, adapt it, transform it together, until is acceptable and worth for everyone. It was a slow and complex process that made each general assembly last between 4h and 5h after each person's day at work.

In my fieldnotes, I noted how unbelievable this felt to me throughout all the assemblies of the first few months. But this seemed to be how Asilo maintained its integrity and how it reproduced itself, I noted: on November 15th, 2021, it was one of my first assemblies at l'Asilo, on a rainy autumn Monday evening. The meeting was held in the theater, where the chairs were carefully arranged in a circle. The "UFO" microphone sat in the middle, its blinking light drawing attention to its role in bridging the online and in-person participants. On the computer screen in the central chair, a few faces of remote participants flickered in and out as connections faltered. At some point, Cecilia, or Ceci, as everyone called her, spoke up. Sitting slightly forward in her chair, with her notebook resting on her lap, she addressed the assembly in her passionate tone. The topic at hand was a proposal from a photographer based in Rome, who wanted to host photography courses at l'Asilo. She had suggested two options: a 20-hour course for €180 per participant, or a longer 50-hour course for a higher fee. Ceci leaned into the discussion, making her position clear: "L'Asilo," she began, "has always been about experimenting together. Finding new ways to do things. It's in our DNA as a space, as a community. We exist to try what hasn't been done before, politically ambitious solutions that are consistent with who we are and the principles we share."

She paused briefly, looking around the circle as if to ensure everyone was following. Then she continued, her voice calm but resolute: “Now, let’s talk about this proposal. At first, it might make you think, ‘Why would we even consider this? Someone coming from outside the neighborhood, asking for €180 for a 20-hour course? That’s a lot of money!’ And yes, it is a lot—especially here, in this neighborhood. Most people around us simply can’t afford that kind of fee. So, politically, it’s not acceptable to just nod and say yes. But,” she added, her voice softening, “that doesn’t mean we reject it outright. The point isn’t to say no—it’s to ask the right questions. Can the price be lowered? If so, by how much? Could scholarships or exceptions be made? Or maybe, this course, which is understandable and legitimate in itself, would simply be better held in a more professional setting, somewhere where this kind of cost wouldn’t raise eyebrows?”

The room was quiet, save for the occasional sound of someone lighting a cigarette next to the window or slightly moving their chair. The photographer, joining remotely, seemed slightly defensive, as did one of their supporters, also participating online. There was some back-and-forth, with Cecilia occasionally pausing to explain her reasoning further. “I know it’s harder to communicate like this,” she said, gesturing toward the screen where the photographer’s pixelated face appeared. “But this isn’t about rejecting your work. It’s about ensuring that what we do here stays true to what l’Asilo is: a space for everyone, not just those who can pay. And that takes thought, and time, and dialogue.” After some debate, the assembly didn’t reject the proposal outright, nor did it approve it. Instead, the matter was deferred to a working group for further discussion. “Let’s talk it through more carefully in the ‘scenic arts’ table,” someone suggested, a sentiment that the assembly seemed to accept as a practical step forward.

That night, I realized how emblematic this process was of l’Asilo’s ethos: a deliberate commitment to slowness, collective reflection, and consensus, even at the cost of efficiency. Decisions weren’t rushed, and no proposal, no matter how seemingly straightforward, was approved without grappling with its political implications. It struck me how much this ethos permeated the space, a constant reminder of the experimental and deeply democratic nature of l’Asilo. Also, as it can be grasped from Ceci’s intervention and as I will elaborate in the conclusion of this thesis, consensus in l’Asilo had an explicit prefigurative and utopian dimension. However, this fascinating “care for the process,” as it was sometimes called, did not come without drawbacks. The commitment for the centrality of the assembly and the slow,

participatory and horizontal process of consensus decision-making came at the expense of efficiency. And while this term certainly has capitalist undertones which surely would not inspire l'Asilo's activists to make sacrifices for it, the marathon assembly sessions lasting well into the night presented challenges also from the same feminist and anticapitalist points of view that activists seek to advance, particularly in relation to issues of time, inclusivity, and care. To this, I dedicate the next section.

### **3.1. Is Participatory Democracy For Wealthy Singles? Or: The Privileges And Pitfalls Of Biographical Availability In Activist Spaces**

The weekly assembly at l'Asilo offers a vivid microcosm of the space's political culture and its tensions. Framed as a practice of radical democracy, the assembly is guided by a commitment to consensus and collective reflection. Yet its open-ended duration, late starts, and lack of structured care provisions reveal the hidden exclusions of this ideal. In particular, the assembly's temporality privileges those with flexibility and biographical availability, while marginalizing those with care responsibilities or limited time. In what follows, I analyze these dynamics in relation to gender, class, and the unequal burdens of participation.

Nominally, the assembly had an official start time, but punctuality was rarely observed. Typically, meetings would begin 30 minutes to an hour later than scheduled. This flexibility was widely accepted and rooted in a local cultural understanding. In Southern Italy, strict punctuality is rarely expected; delays are common and socially coded. As I adjusted to this rhythm during my first weeks in Naples, I quickly learned that "arriving on time" was more of a suggestion than a rule. Before long, I found myself arriving at least 30 minutes late, sometimes 45, aiming to avoid both excessive waiting and the risk of missing the opening moments.

Despite this shared tolerance, occasional frustrations surfaced, both in person and on the group's Telegram chat. "If we're always starting late, why not just shift the official start time?" some members would ask, while others voiced resentment at being among the first to arrive, only to end up setting up the room (arranging chairs, preparing the computer for note-taking) tasks that could have been done together. Before particularly significant assemblies, messages circulated in the chat urging members to "be on time," as there was "a lot to discuss," or "important decisions to make." These reminders seldom produced full punctuality but did sometimes reduce delays to around 30 minutes.

In a way, this relaxed approach to time fascinated me. Unlike the rigid schedules of capitalist workplaces, there was an almost countercultural quality to the assembly's flexibility: a willingness to let spontaneity and improvisation take precedence. This ethos extended to the remarkable length of meetings, ultimately justified with the idea that consensus, or real democracy, takes time. Here, discussions would continue as long as needed to reach consensus, creating a sense of freedom from the demands of efficiency.

Yet, this freedom revealed certain limitations, particularly through the lens of care responsibilities. For members with family obligations, the lack of a clear start and end time created a significant barrier. The unpredictability left caregivers in a bind: arrive early and potentially waste time waiting or arrive "late" and risk missing part of the conversation. The long hours (sometimes stretching four to five hours in the evening) also excluded anyone responsible for children at home. Occasionally, a separated father would attend with his young son in tow, but he was the exception. In practice, the assembly's regulars were predominantly those without caregiving responsibilities; that is, those that in Social Movement Studies would be defined as having "biographical availability" (McAdam, 1988), anyway denoting an indirect exclusion, dependent on case, that shaped the group's makeup and perspectives.

Also food was a latent point of tension. The assembly's timing conflicted with the local dinner hour, typically around 21:00 in Naples. Assemblies often began at 19:00 and could run past midnight, disrupting eating schedules. Before the pandemic, an attempt had been made to address this by introducing a mid-meeting break around 21:00, encouraging members to bring food to share in a communal meal. This practice, though well-intentioned, quickly revealed underlying gendered dynamics. Women tended to bring homemade dishes, while men often contributed with a bag of chips or other store-bought snacks, unintentionally placing an additional caregiving burden on female members. The breaks themselves often stretched longer than planned, as activists lingered over wine and conversation, making it difficult to return to the serious tone of the assembly and further extending the night. Ultimately, the communal dinner practice faded and then stopped with the Covid-19 pandemic, when eating together became something to be avoided for sanitary reasons, and it was then never revived.

During my time at l'Asilo, the question of dinner was managed in various improvised ways. Some participants would eat a snack beforehand to stave off hunger, while others waited until

after the assembly, hoping it might end around 22:00 but prepared for a much later night. When meetings ended near midnight, those still unfed would walk together to a falafel stand, grabbing a quick bite before heading home to sleep. On nights when we wrapped up closer to 22:00, a relatively early end by l'Asilo standards, a smaller group might propose a more leisurely dinner at La Rurale, a family-owned restaurant nearby. "Hey, I'm calling La Rurale. Who's joining? Hands up!" someone would usually say as the assembly drew to a close. The number of takers varied, but generally, no more than half the assembly would join. For me, these late dinners were precious moments, a chance to decompress with others after the intensity of the meeting. Around the table at La Rurale, with a glass of wine in hand, conversations would flow freely, weaving reflections on the assembly with broader political discussions.

Yet, this informal gathering underscored another layer of division. Though La Rurale could be said to be affordable by local standards, some members (often younger artists, students, and those with limited incomes) chose instead to head home for dinner, highlighting an economic divide. In these ways, the rhythms of the assembly such as its fluid approach to time, the long hours, the informal social rituals, revealed both the ideals and the constraints of l'Asilo. While the assembly strove to be inclusive and participatory, the demands of time and care continued to shape who could participate fully and how they engaged in the life of the community.

Anyone who has participated in social movements knows that these dynamics are not uncommon; rather, they are often the norm. Yet the case of l'Asilo demonstrates how care, despite being frequently discussed, was seldom integrated into its practices in a meaningful way. Joan Tronto's concept of care democracy offers a critical perspective here. As Tronto argues, we should "redefine democracy to capture the way it has to manage care" (Tronto, 2015, p. 13) and ensure that care responsibilities are distributed equitably—something l'Asilo struggled to achieve. The assembly's flexibility, such as its resistance to rigid schedules and its emphasis on consensus, was meant to embody democratic ideals. However, these same practices excluded those who could not afford unpredictability due to caregiving duties. This revealed a failure to address what Tronto calls "the allocation of caring responsibilities" in a democratic context (Tronto, 2015, p. 37). Furthermore, while the assembly spoke of care and occasionally tried to address it, such as with communal meals, these efforts were undermined by those very gendered dynamics that assume, normalize and reinforce the role of women as carers.

Along with Tronto, a more participatory project (of which the Neapolitan commons movement was part of) to depatriarchalize politics<sup>50</sup> produced the *Feminise Politics Now!* booklet, which specifically critiques the failure to integrate care into participatory structures and proposes ways forward (Roth et al., 2020). For example, it highlights how often, in progressive movements, the absence of structured care practices hinders long-term sustainability and inclusivity. But feminist and care-focused movements have shown that integrating care into deliberative processes is possible, whether through structured agendas, decentralized decision-making, or shared childcare responsibilities. The contrast between these approaches and l'Asilo's practices underscores the gap between care rhetoric and care integration. Ultimately, l'Asilo's assemblies reflected a commitment to participatory democracy, but their failure to manage care effectively limited inclusivity. Tronto argues that a truly democratic society "makes people free to care" (Tronto, 2015, p. 38) and ensures that care needs are recognized and met—a challenge that l'Asilo's practices did not fully address. Yet, as I will highlight in the conclusion of this chapter, these obstacles to (care) democracy are arguably difficult to address at the small scale when wider society lacks real (care) equality.

These tensions between the ideals of care and the practicalities of participation are not unique to l'Asilo, nor are they limited to gender. As Choi-Fitzpatrick (2015) argues, in many social movement organizations, leaders and organizers navigate a fundamental contradiction between cultural expectations for inclusive engagement and the organizational pressure for efficiency. This often results in the use of what he calls "staging" (manipulating procedures to give the appearance of democratic process) and "scripting" (employing language to reinforce that appearance), which may uphold legitimacy while foreclosing genuine participation. At l'Asilo, while formal consensus practices aim to include everyone, the burdens of time, energy, and rhetorical fluency subtly enforce classed exclusions, echoing the dynamics of symbolic democracy management that Choi-Fitzpatrick describes.

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<sup>50</sup> 'Depatriarchalization of politics' is the expression adopted in the Neapolitan and Italian context to refer to what at the European level has been mostly referred to as 'Feminization' or 'Feministization' of politics. The concept 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' was chosen 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/>.

### 3.2. Barriers To Inclusion: Assembly Culture And Class Distinctions At l'Asilo

In their in-depth ethnographic study of the factors influencing the choice of communication and decision-making models in the Global Justice Movement(s), Della Porta et al. 2013 argue that at the individual level general norms count more than socio-demographic characteristics. At the group level, the authors consider a *cultural* dimension (ideological tradition, range of issues, degree of homogeneity in terms of lifestyle and so on), an *organizational* dimension (centralization, professionalization, structuration etc.), and an *action* dimension (rejection or acceptance of violence, use of new technologies etc.). However, among the socio-demographic variables considered in their studies, while variables like education and employment status are present, social class is not really considered. Indeed, as anticipated, the class background of activists is rarely talked about in Social Movement Studies.

However, some scholars have placed some attention on it ethnographically. Lagalisse, mentioned above, has done extensive ethnographic research on the anarchist movement in North America (comparing it to the one in Mexico), revealing that its conception of “good politics” is highly influenced by class, gender, race, and cultural background, as well as their intersection (where their understanding of “intersectionality,” though, is highly problematized).<sup>51</sup> Lagalisse notes that consensus decision-making, among anarchist circles in the anglo-saxon world, embodies bourgeois social norms, particularly the expectation of neutrality, restraint, and a lack of emotional expression. She notices how working-class participants frequently critique these processes, seeing them as a form of feigned neutrality or “fancy bullshit lingo” employed by university-educated elites, echoing Bourdieu’s concept of the bourgeois “habitus,” where self-restraint and objectivity are markers of class distinction. And even David Graeber, a prominent advocate of direct democracy and consensus, acknowledges that in those circles “there was a fine line between creating a ‘safe’ environment [...] and playing the role of the gracious upper-middle-class hostess, who is expected to perform the endless work of smoothing over differences, and maintain a constant agreeable façade so as to keep the business of sociality running effectively” (Graeber, 2010, pp. 332–333).

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<sup>51</sup> Lagalisse critiques how intersectionality, within activist milieus, often becomes a moral and performative framework that reproduces class and cultural hierarchies. She argues that instead of dismantling structural inequalities, it can reinforce neoliberal logics of self-formation and “good politics.” (2016)

In l'Asilo manners were quite different from those described by Lagalisie for North American anarchists. After all, this was Naples, Southern Italy, an area with unique cultural codes that are, however, quite more similar to Mexican ones than to Canadians. Indeed, the bourgeoisness at meetings differed from that of English-speaking middle classes, who expressed it through self-containment, hand-signs, and repressions of emotions and bodily reactions. Instead, interventions at l'Asilo's assemblies were mostly highly theatrical. In many ways, it seemed an oratory contest like the ones described as the foundation of Greek democracy in the (original ancient) agora. In part, I believe, this had to do with a specifically Neapolitan attitude when speaking, that tend to include a theatrical element. Also, a significant portion of l'Asilo's activists were, literally, actors. But at least of equal importance was, however, a class component: in fact, those who were not actors, were academics most of the times. Others were artists, other students. But clearly working class (or sub-proletarians) were virtually absent. It was not unfrequent (but neither always that case) that assemblies ended up appearing as a competitive contest among big (often male) orators. Obviously, though, the specific tone of the conversation always depended on the nature and the perceived importance of the issues at hand—always a fundamental factor as argued by Della Porta and Rucht (2013). Were these assemblies often fascinating? I must admit they were, at least for me, yet for many they were difficult to engage with.

In the participatory survey (see Chapter 2 and 5) that l'Asilo's activists responded to, a couple of questions were on the degree to which people felt welcomed in l'Asilo. The optional open-ended question about “feeling welcome” was answered by 23 people. The most recurring theme, that appeared in 5 of these answers, was that the assembly felt “repulsive” for respondents. One of the respondents, for example, answered: “l'Asilo is not a very inclusive space for those who have not experienced similar spaces. The speeches at the assembly can only be understood after years. The most welcoming place is the armory and the dance classes” (res. 20). Another respondent, referring to the time in which he/she joined, writes: “Five or six years ago, the assembly was very participative and poorly equipped with tools for moderation and inclusion. Entering the assembly meant entering a fortress where intervening was scary” (res. 24). Then, in an interview, also Luca also mentioned his perceived lack of oratorial skills:

On a practical level I don't know how to do anything. At most I intervene in some Assembly with some conceptual intervention that doesn't 'stir the waters' (change anyone's opinion), because I

don't have the skill learned in years and years of movement of a Giorgio or a Giacomo [...] I don't have that rhetorical ability, so I don't stir the waters at all.... (Interview Luca, Pos. 193)

These kind of barriers are well known in the literature on deliberation. Iris Marion Young (1996) critiqued deliberative democracy by emphasizing that social power can manifest in the devaluation of certain speaking styles, as well as in an internalized sense of speaking privilege, in addition to economic dependence and political domination—all of which can prevent individuals from participating as equals. After all, psychological challenges intersect with social inequalities, leading to individual perceiving a diminished entitlement to express themselves, what Bourdieu (1987) called the *droit de parole*. In l'Asilo these dynamics were beyond clear. At times, cultural capital was even explicitly exhibited and used as a way to legitimize oneself when speaking. I remember more than one exchange in assemblies starting with a scholar-activist expressing some variation of “This is something I know because it is something I have studied”, and an artist replying by starting the following intervention claiming “I also have a degree”. Clearly, sometimes the point was made more humbly and constructively than others, and intellectuals' interventions could be also very useful and inspiring. But for sure they were a vivid expression of evident power dynamics. In the following section I will explore further this divide through the *Cultivision* conflict.

Yet, to conclude on the *droit de parole* and the oratory contests, one could say that the project on depatriarchalizing politics that I mentioned a few paragraphs above was precisely to tame or eradicate the effects that gender differences had on participation, including in assemblies. The effort to bring in care explicitly through facilitation (which was explored in chapter 5) was, among other things, to tame the “oratorial contest” vibe, a feminist effort to feminize politics in the assembly (time-keeping interventions, rotating roles, letting space for emotions etc.), which on the one hand was useful and necessary, but on the other was involving yet another shift of caring labor for activist women, given it was them who constantly had to push for having more facilitation, time-keeping interventions, rotating roles, doing a check on emotions etc.—a dynamic well acknowledged in the literature (Graeber, 2010; Lagalis, 2016). Yet, facilitation did not dissolve the fine line between “creating a ‘safe’ environment [...] and playing the role of the gracious upper-middle-class hostess” (Graeber, 2010, pp. 332–333), was sometimes met with opposition, and had mixed successes.

#### 4. (Im)material Labor, Discursive Power, and the Struggles of Care in l'Asilo

In several in-depth interviews, participants reflected, both explicitly and implicitly, on the tensions between activists who regularly attended the assembly and those who primarily used other spaces within l'Asilo. These reflections revealed a dynamic typical of self-managed spaces across contexts and histories but also one deeply entangled with class differences. At the heart of these tensions lay diverging understandings of care, both in its practices and in its political implications.

From the outset of my research, I noticed how the assembly often occupied a central role in narratives about l'Asilo. Activists who participated in the assembly were frequently perceived as institutionally oriented, while those who avoided it were described as adhering to an anarchist (or more specifically, anarcho-individualist) approach. Assembly attendees often accused non-attendees of failing to grasp the collective ethos of l'Asilo as a commons, dismissing them as “free-riders” or as engaging in a “proprietary use” of the space. Initially, I viewed this critique with skepticism, given my own political sympathies for left-libertarianism or anarchism as collective organization. Framing “free-riders” as “anarchists” seemed to me a reductive ideological shorthand, conflating unorganized individualism with anarchism.

However, as I delved deeper into the tensions surrounding these dynamics, it became clear that they could not be reduced to ideological disagreements alone. Alberta, an activist I introduced in Chapter 4, articulated these complexities in her account of the *Cultivision conflict*—a debate that emerged around a big private funding grant won by l'Asilo in 2020.<sup>52</sup> Her reflections brought into focus not only the ideological dimensions of this divide but also the role of care (and the lack thereof) in navigating these tensions:

There was the issue of *Cultivision*, which definitely caused some divisions, perhaps building on preexisting tensions and disagreements. But participating in the grant application process certainly broke something. Back then, I had just arrived, but there had been disagreements that perhaps weren't addressed with enough care. On the other hand, there was also a very strong desire to experiment on a new level—not just about the money itself, but about innovating on that plane as well. So, it was a very difficult choice, and perhaps, in some cases, people pushed the accelerator a

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<sup>52</sup> The Cultivision debate split l'Asilo between those who saw accepting a private grant as an opportunity to “hack the system” to improve the commons and those who saw it as a betrayal of self-management and the commons. Once the funds were accepted, several in the latter camp withdrew from participation.

bit too hard—sometimes even deliberately. This was especially true for Giacomo; I think he really took the opportunity to hammer on this issue. And this has been a traditional issue at l'Asilo: the division between those with a more libertarian approach and those who seek a relationship with institutions and the market, trying to contaminate, hack, or disrupt it. And, of course, this dynamic erupted even more in this case. In fact, I think it was even intentionally made to explode at a certain point. That's when some people decided to leave.

Alberta's account led me to reflect on how this particular conflict revealed much about the broader tensions at l'Asilo. The ideological division she describes, between libertarian autonomy and institutional engagement, became a focal point during the *Cultivision* debate. Those in favor of applying for the grant viewed it as an opportunity to innovate and explore new possibilities, while others saw it as a compromise of l'Asilo's foundational principles.

This division was particularly visible in the long-standing rift between the assembly and spaces like the armory (*armeria*). The assembly's deliberative model often clashed with the armory's action-oriented approach, and Alberta elaborated on the unique role of the armory within l'Asilo:

The separation between those in the space and those in the assembly deepened, although it had always been there. But it's something that, I repeat, happens in many spaces. In fact, it's a miracle that it never completely exploded at l'Asilo. But yes, at the time, the main issue was with the armory. The armory was like a black hole: people worked there, but no one even knew who they were, how many they were, or how they were organized. There was controversy about this. Some people outright refused to come to the assembly; they didn't want to. It wasn't their environment. It was really a question of methods and languages—a way of doing politics that wasn't theirs.

Alberta defended its participants, highlighting their contributions as political in their own way:

If you needed a carnival float, the armory would build it and bring it to the carnival. If you needed to make *festa del friariello*, the armory would have a booth and t-shirts with the "Upside Down" logo.<sup>53</sup> It was a space where you could propose any idea, and they would respond creatively and

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<sup>53</sup> Friarielli are a typical Neapolitan vegetable traditionally sold in bundles (*fascio*). The *friarielli* celebration in the Neapolitan neighborhood of Materdei is an antifascist event organized under the slogan "The only good fascio is the friarielli one" (*L'unico fascio buono è chill' 'e friarielli*). This event commemorates the time when neighborhood activists reclaimed a public building from a neofascist group and transformed it into a commons called the *Giardino Liberato*. The "Upside Down" t-shirts, featuring the wordplay "Old *Fascion*," are an

politically. They would say, “Why should I sit there for four hours talking? That’s not politics to me. Let me fix the door; I couldn’t care less about answering emails.”

These tensions were, in a way, those that exploded during the *Cultivision* debate, as Alberta recalled:

But it’s always the issue with grants, that set deadlines. In fact, the worst problems happen when there’s a deadline. When consensus can follow its own timeline, it works better, but when there’s a deadline, things fall apart. There were people who had already worked on the grant because, obviously, you don’t start working on it only after you’ve reached consensus. Personally, I wait until the consensus is there to protect myself, but those people cared so much about it that they had already started working on it because otherwise, it would have been hard to submit it in time. So, at that point, there was even more at stake because they had already invested effort, and there was a lot of desire to move forward. On the other hand, there was a lot of reluctance, and in the end, it was decided to go ahead with it. But some people said, “Fine, I don’t agree, but go ahead,” and some of those people were never seen again.

The failure to adequately care for diverse practices and perspectives shaped these outcomes. The grant application process revealed a hierarchy of participation within l’Asilo. Those most invested in the assembly’s deliberative processes—and those who had already committed effort to the grant—ultimately shaped the decision. Others, feeling excluded or disillusioned, chose to leave the commons. By 2019, these unresolved tensions had already begun to weaken the collective fabric of l’Asilo. Alberta noted that key figures, such as Luciano, central to the armory’s ethos of shared practices, had left the space, further contributing to its fragmentation. As I reflected on Alberta’s account, it became increasingly clear to me that these ideological divisions could not be fully understood without examining the role of class. The differing approaches to care, whether expressed through deliberative processes or practical action, were deeply intertwined with the material and social positions of participants within l’Asilo.

It is through the voices of other interviewees that this connection came into sharper focus, particularly in terms of how class dynamics shaped the ways people engaged with the collective and navigated its tensions. In the following lines, I turn to another interlocutor whose

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antifascist reference to the 1945 moment when Benito Mussolini’s body was displayed hanging upside down by partisans in Milan.

perspective illuminates the interplay between class and care more explicitly, offering a deeper understanding of how these dynamics influenced not only individual participation but also the broader organizational culture of l'Asilo. In his interview, Luca provides a nuanced analysis of the contradictions within l'Asilo, especially regarding how class influenced a prominence of discursive rather than embodied politics of care.

Luca introduced the topic by explaining how the difference between L'Asilo and Scugnizzo Liberato (another commons in Naples) lies in their origins and the role of physical labor in shaping their respective communities. As he realized through a conversation with a Scugnizzo activist, at the time of the occupation Scugnizzo Liberato was a dilapidated and “broken” space, so collective repair work by activists/commoners was necessary and transformative. The act of rebuilding forged community bonds and redefined care as an embodied, material practice: <sup>54</sup>

Lo Scugnizzo was all broken, everything was damaged, everything was run-down (*sgarrupato*)... And so they had to work hard to fix it. I mean, there, even intellectuals worked, they actually became “*fravecatori*,” as we say in Naples, meaning those who work with cement. They had to labor to fix it up.

This shared labor, he realized, had acted as a filter. By contrast, when the l'Asilo community occupied the building, they inherited a space that was already functional and repaired. This had profound implications for how the space was filled and who felt they belonged:

L'Asilo was already in good condition when you found it... And this allowed people to fill the space... [Roberto] used this image—to fill the void with words.

The lack of a need for physical labor meant that discourse, rather than embodied care, became the defining mode of participation. This, Luca argues, reinforced the dominance of intellectual and bourgeois contributors:

The community that occupied l'Asilo was already a mix of petit bourgeois, bourgeois, noble, and intellectual classes... who then found a space with everything fixed where the only thing left to do, essentially, was to build the theater [...] The assembly the month after the occupation [...] there were some interventions, basically presentations of PhD theses! [...] Let's not kid ourselves! I mean,

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<sup>54</sup> (For an academic account of material care at Scugnizzo Liberato see Sciarelli, 2024)

there's the intellectual class [...] That intellectual class that was left outside the main channels of cooptation in the city, whether it be universities, theaters, cinemas, various arts. That's the class composition that occupied l'Asilo. That small-medium bourgeoisie, then tending towards nobility, intellectuals, who were left outside the main channels. [...] Well, the perception in the city is this: l'Asilo is a bourgeois space, but it's realistic, I think it really captures the essence of the thing, meaning that it's not a space, sitting in an assembly at l'Asilo is complex.

Indeed, for Luca, things have not changed much in terms of class composition of l'Asilo's assembly in the current phase, and a further issue lies in a lack of consciousness of these class privileges:

In the assembly, we are bourgeois... If I have to describe the class composition: middle class. In the assembly, no one sits who isn't—perhaps with the exception of Mario—we are all property owners. So, from my point of view, we are bourgeois. In the most classical sense of the definition. [...] And we also struggle to recognize our own privilege... as bourgeois...

Also for Luca, like for Alberta, a pivotal moment in l'Asilo's history was the *Cultivision* conflict, for which, however, he favored a class-based interpretation rather than an ideological one. Or, to be more specific, Luca understands it primarily as a clash between manual workers and intellectuals.

The *Cultivision* moment, the first Big Bang moment, is a conflict between intellectuals and manual workers... It's really that! And who won it? Unfortunately, the first ones. For years, the workers who built the theater with their hands, who labored, didn't have the dialectical skill to hold their ground in assembly. They were constantly silenced by those with better rhetorical abilities. That was the first rupture in the community.

Luca identifies this as a “class conflict” in which the bourgeois spirit of l'Asilo prevailed:

Then what is l'Asilo? It is the soul that won that conflict... That was a class conflict. And if we want to tell the truth, it wasn't won by those who work with their hands or those who live off their labor. That conflict was won by the bourgeois spirit of l'Asilo. That is, we are the heirs of that bourgeois spirit that won the class struggle within the community. This is absolutely clear, really...

This emphasis on discourse—intellectual, abstract, and removed from material concerns—is another key dynamic Luca highlights. At l’Asilo, participation became contingent upon one’s ability to articulate ideas within an assembly, reinforcing existing class hierarchies:

We only nourish ourselves with discourse. And discourse is not body, there is nothing bodily in all of this. Of gender. Gender is always discourse... What comes to mind is... what comes to mind is that the bourgeoisie has mastered discourse, it has all the discursive capacity to not... To appear non-violent, to seem deconstructed, and that’s enough for them. In a sense.

Here, Luca reflects on how bourgeois participants maintained their privilege through their capacity for rhetorical performance. In contrast, those whose contributions were more physical or practical were often excluded from recognition:

Those in the armory, for example, may not have had the rhetorical skills to appear adequate, to earn the “stamp of approval” as a comrade, as the de-patriarchalized comrade. Meanwhile, the bourgeoisie in l’Asilo had all the rhetorical skills necessary to earn that approval. And that is enough for them.

This dynamic shaped not only who felt welcome in the space but also what types of work and care were valued. While assemblies were often verbose and inaccessible, Luca recounts how, in a specific period, more practical, hands-on groups like the armory table thrived in other ways:

In September and October... At that point, in the Assembly, there were only four of us—Alessandro, Mario, Simone, and me... We were the four and we would meet every Monday in the assembly, and it was also welcoming, meaning that if anyone arrived and wanted to hold a concert, we’d say, “Yes, yes, everything’s fine, we’ll do it in the theater.” But on Tuesdays, the armory table had become the real assembly of l’Asilo. I mean, the table. The armory table was attended by aerial dancers, voguing, armeria, darkroom... There were even 30 people sometimes... because they would gather around projects. They would gather around... “*Amm fa’ a Firanda, facimm a Firanda*” [let’s do the Firanda, let’s organize the Firanda]. [...] So, let’s say there was all this enthusiasm, and imagine this enthusiasm gathering around these subjects, which eventually spilled over until... the long wave is the *Firanda*<sup>55</sup> today [...]... the voguing, the aerial dancers, that’s it, that collective, it’s part of that

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<sup>55</sup> *La Santa Firanda* is a recurrent event, held in l’Asilo, of independent publishing and illustration: [https://www.instagram.com/santaFiranda\\_fest/](https://www.instagram.com/santaFiranda_fest/)

collective. So, there was this thing in September, October, where *in the Assembly there were four or five of us, and at the armoury table there were 30 people*. They'd gather around the... "Do we need to fix the armoury toilet?" And 30 people would gather and get things done. *Totally non-verbal*... I mean, the meetings... the average duration was one hour.

Despite this critique of bourgeois dominance, Luca also acknowledges the advantages of having a mixed-class composition within l'Asilo. In fact, he argues that it was precisely the ability of the bourgeoisie to use their privileges, and particularly their fluency in legal and institutional discourse, that allowed l'Asilo to navigate its foundational phase. This fluency, he explains, was instrumental in gaining recognition from the administration of Luigi De Magistris and establishing l'Asilo as a commons:

What happened here, in truth, is the use of law—the bourgeois language par excellence, forgive me. If we want to tell the truth, it's actually a good thing to have a mixed-class composition. [...] Because it allows you to reason with the language of evil, the language of the devil... That bourgeoisie that was able to engage with De Magistris and Lucarelli, etc., has not been able to reject its own privilege. In fact, its class privileges, gender privileges... the privileges of not being oppressed, of a non-oppressed class, it brought them, it unleashed them... in the comedy of l'Asilo.

This legal innovation, grounded in bourgeois expertise, became a model for other commons in Naples. Through their engagement with law, l'Asilo demonstrated how radical spaces could "hack" institutional frameworks to gain recognition and legitimacy. For Luca, these dynamics are emblematic of how bourgeois privilege is reproduced, even in spaces that claim to reject it. He critiques the reluctance of l'Asilo's community to address issues of economy, labor, and class:

It's a space that has never questioned itself about economies. [A space] that feels ashamed—ashamed, I mean, to talk about money, a space that is ashamed to talk about money, about work. This is outrageous! I mean, from my point of view, it's a weakness...

Through these reflections, Luca paints a complex picture of l'Asilo as a space where care, class, and discourse are in constant tension. While the ideals of inclusion and mutual aid remain central, the practices often reflect deeper inequalities, particularly in how different forms of labor and care are valued. At the same time, the ability to mobilize bourgeois privilege strategically also highlights how such contradictions can generate new forms of political

possibility, from institutional recognition to the creation of a commons network. This critique underscores the need to rethink care not only as a value but as a practice that bridges the divide between discourse and the body, between intellectual labor and material work.

## 5. Assemblies at the Margins: Care, Leadership, and Class in Àgora

I might not have noticed the class dynamics at play in l'Asilo had I not later conducted fieldwork in Àgora. As I outlined in the second chapter, I selected Àgora as my second case study because it appeared to be a place where the practice of care within and for the commons was central—yet deeply marked by contradictions and tensions. Far from resembling an idealized version of the commons, Àgora was a space where, upon entry, one could almost feel the tension in the air. A friend, before I had ever stepped into Àgora, once told me, “*I like Àgora because it's real; because if people need to, they'll scream at each other during assemblies.*” This palpable tension seemed to reflect the character of the Raval itself, the neighborhood in which Àgora is located. The Raval's reputation precedes it; as I detailed in chapter three, it is often viewed with suspicion by many middle-class Barcelonans and tourists alike, who avoid the area (particularly its southern parts, where Àgora is situated) out of fear of being pickpocketed or encountering other perceived dangers.

Interestingly, then, Àgora could provoke discomfort to some for reasons entirely opposite to those of l'Asilo. Instead of feeling out of place due to PhD-style interventions during assemblies, niche experimental music concerts, or *frikie* cinema screenings that might induce a sense of ignorance-driven impostor syndrome, discomfort in Àgora arose from a much more visceral encounter with its social fabric. For a white, middle-class individual (like myself, a PhD student anyway), this discomfort could begin with something as simple as a slightly creepy gap-toothed smile of an older neighbor or the lively banter in Arabic during a heated game of pool among North African migrants. And it could only increase with the realization that the space was run by what are usually the most demonized and marginalized communities in society: sex workers (*putas*)<sup>56</sup>, drug users, Roma individuals (*gitanas*), homeless people, and various South American communities. Across these collectivities, it was rather common for people to have dissident gender identities. The different and overlapping lines of

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<sup>56</sup> In Raval (but more broadly, in some Spanish-speaking activist environments), the originally derogative term *puta* (‘bitch’) has been proudly reclaimed by mobilized and organized sex workers—in a very common move for demonized identities (think of *queer*, *crib* etc.). Consequently, in Raval, the term has mostly lost its derogatory effect: in activist circles I barely ever heard anyone use the term *trabajadoras sexuales* (‘sex workers’); everyone says *putas*.

marginalization were so many and so different that conflicts were all but rare. After all, marginalization in itself is not enough to build a shared identity, so, for example, a transgender sex worker from Colombia using drugs might have difficulties in finding commonalities with an Algerian cisgender man who does not speak Spanish, and vice versa.

While it stroke me at first, it should not surprise, then, that assemblies, especially during my first months in Àgora, would start with the question: “Any conflict this week? Any violence?” Àgora’s assemblies were held on Tuesdays at 19.30. Because I was used to l’Asilo, when I started to participate to Àgora’s assemblies, in January 2023, I sometimes arrived a few minutes later, but soon realized that, in Àgora, at 19.30 sharp, people would be seated around the table ready to address the issues of the day. Only in very exceptional and specific instances a delay would occur. Surely, it must be noted that this was also made easier by the fact that the number of people one would expect at Àgora’s assemblies would just be a fraction of those of l’Asilo. In a way, the number of people in Àgora’s assemblies with respect to those in l’Asilo proportionally reflect the dimension of the space: l’Asilo was a huge building with different rooms, floors, activities, terraces, toilets... Àgora was an urban garden of about 650m<sup>2</sup>, with a lot of plants, wide areas with soil floor, tables and chairs, mostly covered by umbrellas and by a wider texture for shade, a little wooden house with its *porche*, a covered area with a communal kitchen, a couple of areas for vegetable gardening, a playground for kids, a stage for shows, a ping-pong and a pool, and a very clean toilet. Overall, less people were involved in it. But respecting starting times, I realize by living in Barcelona, was actually more related to cultural aspects than one of numbers, punctuality simply being more valued in Catalunya than Southern Italy.

In assemblies we were usually in a number between 5 and 10 people, though occasionally, when very important discussions were to be had we could get closer to 15 or 20. If around 5, we would perfectly fit in the *porche* of the wooden cabin, where whoever was doing the *permanencia* (duty) would usually sit, as that was a cozy spot that also allowed for having a good oversight of what was happening in the whole space. If we were more, we would sit around a big rectangular table just below that. Different from l’Asilo, no electronic device would be used. At the beginning of each assembly, someone would go inside the small wooden cabin to pick up a little notebook, a paper calendar, and a pen. In several months of proper fieldwork, plus a period spanning years in which I participated as an activist more, I have only seen one of three people taking notes, one of whom was myself. Usually, a small page of the

notebook would be enough. The other important tool was a paper calendar, where future events would be noted down. Particularly in spring and summer, the calendar could get quite busy, with a number of open-door or closed-door meetings, “*vermut*s”<sup>57</sup>, book presentations, expositions, celebrations, meals of other militant collectives planned.

A typical *orden del día* (agenda), apart from the first question that Veronika used to ask about violent episodes,<sup>58</sup> would start with a point about proposals (most often by someone external to Àgora, less often by some of us), followed by an evaluation of past events, a calendarization of future ones, and a brief point about the vegetable garden, especially in spring and summer. The duration of an assembly would obviously depend on how many proposals there were, how intricate their organization might be, and if there was any specific event that would require extensive analysis. The latter was usually some verbal, physical or generally political conflict between collectives or individuals that participate in the space. But the huge majority of the times, everything would be extremely straightforward, and assemblies would be over in half an hour. Then, we would stay there to chat, have a beer, recount stories, gossips, or things that happened in the neighborhood in the last week (“this family has been evicted,” “this sex worker has been harassed,” “this activist has been arrested,” “there is a new drug-dealers occupation in the building across the street” etc.). Sometimes, especially in warm months, we would go have some food and some more drinks after closing the space at 21.30. The short duration of assemblies was something acknowledged and even to be somewhat proud of. One day, María was welcoming someone who was coming to the assembly for the first time and, as she often did, she repeated enthusiastically, laughing and asking for confirmation to the rest, not to worry because assemblies in Àgora are short: “And the shorter the better! In Àgora we keep them short, don’t we? Tell him Lorenzo! In Àgora we don’t *enrollamos* (gabble), half an hour and *ya està* (that’s it)! We don’t need more, huh! We don’t need endless discussions! We discuss what’s needed and then we enjoy, we have a drink! Isn’t it true Lorenzo? Tell them! Hahaha!”

María was obviously the charismatic leader of Àgora, respected by everyone inside it and everywhere else in the neighborhood. I had sensed that from the very first assembly I attended, as I noted in my fieldnotes:

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<sup>57</sup> To ‘organize a *vermut*’, pronounced ‘*vermù*’, would mean to have a get-together, usually with some snacks and drinks, mainly vermouth (an originally Italian spirit but surely more widespread in Spain) but also beer.

<sup>58</sup> Veronika was a Roma woman who was a key figure in Àgora in the first few months of my stay but then, after discussing with a couple of other activists, abruptly stopped coming and was never seen again.

María's leadership is apparent throughout the assembly. Participants freely interrupt each other, yet no one interrupts María. For example, when a man aggressively confronts Ana from Remadies, María swiftly intervenes, saying firmly, "Okay Bob, ya está bien," immediately calming the tension. Later, she confidently instructs Yenifer to manage an incident involving loud music, not violently, but more as an order than as a question. At the same time she seems to be loved and respected by most, really. A young kid who seems to be of Moroccan origin comes to ask her a question during the assembly. She asks "what do you want"? He tells her, politely, to finish what she was saying and not to worry about him. She goes on, and when she's finished he asks for the keys of the wooden *cabaña* in order for him to grab a glass of milk. Meanwhile he intervenes in the conversation saying she's really the sweetest person on earth. He goes inside and gets his glass of milk.

Despite her marginality by society's standards (a black migrant sex worker), she was an extremely smart and diplomatic leader, who enjoyed broad respect in the streets of the neighborhood, in the whole spectrum that went from anarchist activists to even some policemen.<sup>59</sup> She had lived in Raval for decades, since she had moved there from Latin America when she was very young. But how had she become the key figure in Àgora? Serious conflicts had occurred in the management of Àgora around the end of the '10s, just preceding the pandemic, with different factions fighting each other for the control of the space, with some local residents trying to build an association of neighbors taking care of the space, hence renouncing the conflictive and defiant spirit of the space, rooted in its origins as an occupation of private land reclaimed in protest against speculation and in memory of an activist brutally killed by the police on that same street. Others were accused of being young intransigent anarchists, who wanted to strictly advance anarchist ideals, for example by forbidding consuming alcohol in the space, against the interests of *vecinxs del barrio* who wanted to be able to have their beers and vermouths there.<sup>60</sup> These same were accused of making a privatistic use of the space at night, thanks to the extra copies of key they had made with the excuse of watering the vegetable garden. After all sorts of conflictive moments between these groups and specific individuals, with also some violent physical episodes, big assemblies involving all the important activist groups of the neighborhood were held, and it was decided to let the space be managed by a particularly well-respected collective in the *barrio* ("neighborhood"): the *Putas Libertarias del Raval* ("libertarian bitches of Raval").<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> When talking about Raval, I will often not be able to disclose details, to protect my interlocutors' anonymity and privacy. Sometimes, then, the reader will have to take my words for good, even when not backed by descriptions of specific facts.

<sup>60</sup> Alcohol-free spaces are not uncommon in anarchist circles in Barcelona.

<sup>61</sup> Who use, quite interchangeably, the name *Putas Indignadas*.

The sex worker who took most to heart the management of Àgora was María. After several months of collective stewardship by the Putas Libertarias del Raval, ongoing conflicts with other activist groups led the collective to withdraw and leave Àgora under the management of an open assembly. María, however, remained involved as an individual neighbor, not as a delegate. Despite the presence of a few other activists helping to maintain the space, virtually everyone I interviewed agreed that María had become the *de facto* leader. With her involvement, major conflicts diminished, and most agreed that the space became more peaceful, cleaner, and even more beautiful—largely due to the care María devoted to the plants and infrastructure. Her leadership would likely be less viable without her considerable charisma, but the ultimate source of her authority lies in the quality and quantity of care she provides. She is the one who most consistently cleans, waters, cooks, and mediates conflicts. Her authority thus emerges not from formal structures, but from a sustained commitment to everyday maintenance. Yet while this form of care-based leadership is widely perceived as benevolent and indispensable, it also concentrates power in informal ways—raising important questions about long-term accountability and the sustainability of care-led authority. In terms of what I have referred to as “feministization of politics,” care democracy, or simply the redistribution of care, Àgora is far from ideal. It reproduces dominant societal patterns in which intersectionally marginalized subjects perform the majority of care labor. As Gardner et al. (2024) note in their analysis of Extinction Rebellion, both patriarchal and anti-patriarchal elements often coexist within the politics of caring for movements. Older women, in particular, are often found to shoulder the largest share of both formal and informal care work (including organizational, physical, and emotional labor) constituting a social movement-related “triple shift” (Duncombe & Marsden, 1995; James, 1992). Yet, contrary to what is typical in patriarchal arrangements, this unequal burden is accompanied in María’s case by a position of uncontested leadership. Her authority, while informal and rooted in everyday labor, reveals a complex interplay between marginalization, responsibility, and recognition.

## **6. The Tyranny Of Presence? Care And Decision-Making In Àgora And l’Asilo**

In my experience, María’s recognized leadership does not translate into a proprietarian use of the space. I have never witnessed nor heard of María using her role to benefit herself immediately or to use Àgora for her private interests. Both from her statements and from what I observed, as in the conflicts with Jennifer, José, or Maryam, she places Àgora’s interests and

care above her own and her personal relationships. Surely, this cannot be entirely guaranteed, as people's good faith is usually not enough to ensure that hierarchical arrangements prove fair for everyone, yet this is what I was able to observe at this specific time and place. Another key element for understanding Àgora's democratic arrangement is that, as I realized during my involvement in Àgora, and considering its history as I recounted it, the neighborhood's social movements are its ultimate political authority. For example, whenever major crises occurred or important decisions needed to be made, neighborhood collectives reunited and decided on Àgora's direction. Currently, María is the main everyday carer and leader of Àgora, and everyone is quite happy about this, either enthusiastically or by lack of alternatives. At the moment, it would be difficult to imagine a thriving Àgora without the care (time, resources, knowledge, and skills) that María dedicates to it.

This, however, is not without consequences for internal democracy in everyday matters. Unlike l'Asilo, where much attention was given to consensus, in Àgora the issue of ensuring careful horizontality was virtually absent. In assemblies, it was extremely rare for someone to oppose María's opinion. Often, reaching a decision was a matter of convincing her. No formal process for consensus was needed, nor was voting common practice (despite occasional remarks like, "Let's vote on this," which had little effect). Instead, discussions typically progressed smoothly until everyone mostly agreed with María. On the rare occasion when the majority and María held different views, María would say, "Okay, you can go ahead without me; I won't take care of that." For the rest, as María took care of almost everything, nobody ever forced anything onto her. After all, it was straightforward and libertarian too: the ultimate authority on something rested with those who materially cared for it more. Could this also be a form of radical care democracy?

Yet María was not the only one taking care of Àgora. Others were also performing *permanencias*, being responsible for opening the space every day at 5:00 PM and caring for it until the 9:30 PM closing time. In theory, it was a rotating role, though it typically fell on the shoulders of the same three or four people. *Permanencias* were demanding, requiring detailed knowledge of the neighborhood, its dynamics, and its residents to maintain order and manage potential escalations. In addition to opening the space, they watered plants, cleaned the space and bathrooms, cooked free meals, provided basic medical aid if needed, handed out condoms if someone needed it, allowed people to charge their phones, rest, play (cards, domino, pool...) have tea, or chat. Users of the space—those who came frequently but did not participate to

assemblies nor had any other specific responsibility—had actually very similar profiles to activists. Their specific circumstances were usually slightly worse than those of the carers. They were often migrants, many without documents or fluency in Spanish. Some were single mothers with too much on their shoulders to care for a communal garden. Users, of course, also cared for each other independently of activists in various ways, from sharing knowledge and access to resources to offering free haircuts. Despite repeated calls by main activists to “take care of Àgora!” (*El Àgora hay que cuidarlo!*), the concept of care was virtually absent from conversations, even though it was the core activity happening in Àgora every day. Care was not treated as an ideal for building a better society or as a topic for feminist theorization and debate but as the everyday practice of the people in Àgora—the pivotal activity occurring there. In contrast to l’Asilo, conceptual elaborations and debates were generally absent.

Contrary to l’Asilo’s ideals of spontaneity, Àgora’s relations were based on *commitment*: the more someone was present, active, and reliable, the more they were appreciated and respected. But the more they were present, the more was expected from them. And once someone was away for a few days or a longer period, after some initial disappointment or blaming, people were often temporarily forgotten and not spoken about again. This also happened to me, as I was told by a young geographer who was also participating in Àgora and studying it for her PhD. During a period when I was away attending classes at my home university in Florence, the vegetable garden had started to deteriorate, and some activists expressed concern about a lack of care and commitment. She reassured them that things would improve once I returned, but the answer she reported to me was: “Who cares if he is coming back? He is not here now, this is what really matters.” This attitude was not exceptional. People who took a step back from Àgora were almost never talked about; their absence was considered natural, almost cyclical. Only two of the original participants remained active from the time of the occupation. One of them once told me (in an interesting instance of personification) that “Àgora kicks out people” when it is right for them to go.

This kind of spatial personification, where the commons is imagined to have its own will or agency, can be understood through Hyde’s (2018) concept of *collective charisma*. In contrast to the classic image of a charismatic leader, Hyde describes organizations in which charismatic authority is situated not in the individual but in the whole of the collective, producing an affectual and normative atmosphere that shapes behavior and belonging. In Àgora, charisma did not reside in a single figure but emerged through shared rhythms of care, mutual

expectation, and tacit moral codes. The idea that “Àgora kicks out people” reveals how authority could be both distributed and impersonal, manifesting as a subtle but powerful force that members internalized and enacted. As Hyde argues, in such contexts, “the language of power, membership, and engagement reflect affectual social action and traits associated with the emotional community generated by charismatic authority” (Hyde, 2018, p. 14). In this light, Àgora’s affective politics functioned not through formal hierarchies but through collective charisma, an authority grounded in emotional commitment, spatial embeddedness, and shared moral expectation.

By contrast, l’Asilo actively sought to resist what it called the “dictatorship of the presence”—the distortion of egalitarian democratic principles that occurs when some activists, by virtue of being more consistently present, accrue disproportionate decision-making power. The underlying logic for contrasting this tendency was that spending long hours in the space is a privilege not everyone can afford. Thus, l’Asilo’s activists made efforts to consider the voices of those who were less present, or even absent, at the moment of consensus-based decision-making. While Àgora’s model emphasized commitment and presence as the basis for recognition and influence, l’Asilo explicitly problematized this relation between time, visibility, and democratic authority, offering a markedly different model of political belonging.

This has to do with a wider understanding of what being an activist of l’Asilo means. In fact, virtually all activists that have been participating in l’Asilo for a period, although they might be currently living elsewhere (even abroad), are thought to still form part of l’Asilo’s community, and their opinion are considered. After all, in l’Asilo being present is not a value per se. People disappear for months and, when they reappear, it is like as time had not passed. An often-heard motto (again, concepts and slogans guiding l’Asilo’s practices) is that “everybody is necessary, but nobody is indispensable”. In order to translate this principle to practice, activists strive to organize “knowledge-transfers,” so that no single person is responsible for specific aspects of l’Asilo’s activities. Of course, this had limitations, for example with sound technicians for concerts, but translating into the here and now the broader ideal of avoiding a strict division of labor and distribute knowledges as much as possible was always present.

These seemed to me inspiring principles that showed a deep care for a genuine non-hierarchical participatory democracy, and I still see them this way. Yet they reveal a big deal about who are

the political subjects and decision-makers of l'Asilo. Importantly, they are not necessarily much present in the space. They can be in assemblies once per week or even joining online from time to time. What matters is what the power of their argumentation can contribute to l'Asilo's "collective intelligence," no matter where they are. Interestingly, (most of) l'Asilo's activists define themselves as workers engaged in "immaterial labor."<sup>62</sup> Identifying this way is revealing, as it neglects the materiality of any human activity (including writing with one's fingers or dancing with one's body, for that matter) and reinforces a dualistic cartesian view of body vs. mind, materiality vs. immateriality, nature vs. culture. The definition of l'Asilo's "inhabitant," somewhat disconnected by his/her material presence, reflects this dichotomy. And one's disconnection from material matter and one's own body is something intimately associated with elite and bourgeois identities (Bourdieu, 1987; Elias, 1978; Graeber, 2007a; Lagalisse, 2016).

Practically, it seems that to tame the power of those who have the privilege of time for commoning, the opposite privilege risks being reinforced: the one of those who rarely step into l'Asilo and yet are extremely influential with their opinions at the decision-making stage. Contrary to l'Asilo's concerns about the "dictatorship of the presence," in Àgora it was assumed that who spent more time caring for the people and caring for the space would have the last words on things. The logic was very practical: those who live it more know what the problems are, and are those who live it on their skin, so they are the ones who are more entitled to decide on them. All of this was not really debated theoretically but was rather implicit in everyone's understandings. In fact, most people shared with me, in interviews, that they knew that decision-making was not entirely democratic, and that not all decisions were taken in assemblies, but especially those who were not the ones taking them, recognized that for the moment this responded to the practical necessities of Àgora.

Obviously, also this understanding was far from perfect and full of potential pitfalls. Indeed, the rest of Àgora's main activists were more or less inclined to like this understanding of radical democracy. Juan, for example, claimed that he didn't even really believe in assemblies. Juan is a white guy on his 50s, one of the activists who's really been in Àgora since its first occupation, with a passion for photography and the arts but who hardly lives off that, very

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<sup>62</sup> The notion of "immaterial labor," as part of broader "cognitive capitalism," (Hardt & Negri, 2001) has been seriously critiqued by feminists and anthropologists (Yanagisako, 2012).

reserved when in groups but then occasionally talkative in one-to-one interactions. On a cold evening of January 2023, he explained his position to the assembly (which was a pretty well participated and conflictive one, in which he was arguing against a specific collective, as I will detail in chapter 7). He claimed to just be a *vecino* (resident of the neighborhood) who comes to Àgora. Funnily, Raval is not really where his home is (he takes the train every day to his place more in the outskirts) but one could argue (and probably he himself) he lives there nonetheless, because he is truly there everyday, he knows everyone and he has been active in the neighborhood struggles for years. “I’ve been in hundreds of assemblies of movements and collectives,” he said. “And every time, no matter how much you try, power dynamics build up around some people. For me, assemblies are mostly a spectacle of horizontality that’s never really there. So I don’t go to assemblies anymore; I just do what needs to be done for Àgora.” If there was a sensible decision to take, he added, he would take it without consulting the assembly. As an example, he mentioned occasions when African men had no place to sleep and he simply took the keys to Àgora, opened the space for them, and later they invited them for a paella. Yet he also noted that he does attend assemblies when something extraordinary, such as a crisis like the one at hand, requires discussion. He thus recognized their occasional usefulness but often found them superfluous and untrustworthy, given that horizontality is, in his view, largely illusory. Usually, Juan was around on Tuesday nights for assemblies, sometimes listening, sometimes not; he would offer a few words if he had a specific proposal, but otherwise did not engage much.

His position was quite opposite to the one of Nuria, a white woman around the same age. She was the other long-time activist of Àgora. She was possibly the more Catalan activist (most were Catalan for the very fact of living in Catalunya, but she was the one who mostly spoke Catalan etc.). And she was active in a few other neighborhood struggles, that all had in common an anarchist framework. Perhaps quite stereotypically for a Catalan anarchist, she was the most affectionate to protocols to promote horizontality, transparency and so on. When it wasn’t me, she would be the one who would take minutes more often, and very orderly. Sometimes, as minute-taker, she would also facilitate: “hey hey, we are on the point about this event, let’s finish this and then we talk about this other matter later.”

In May 2023, Nuria, at a warmer and way more pleasant assembly than the one above, suggested that Àgora should take a moment of self-criticism: the organization is a bit too vertical and, as a step to take, she suggests that at each assembly we shall do a round of the

circle in which each and everyone expresses their opinion. Maryam thinks this would not be productive, and it would open the way to a lot of “free” criticism. This exchange led to some tension, but no concrete decision. She then suggested at least reading the minutes out loud at the end of each assembly and having them signed by all participants, in order to either correct them or confirm their engagement with the collective decision. This last one was actually implemented for some time after being approved, with Nuria or myself reading out loud the minutes at the end of the assembly before people signed. But, with time, we stopped reading them out loud and we limited ourselves to sign it. The cases of Juan and Nuria are meant to nuance my own analysis of the “unspoken” qualities of care and democracy in Àgora: as these two stories testify, not everything was “unspoken” and not everyone shared a same commonsense.

## **7. Conclusion**

This chapter has explored how class shapes practices of care and democracy in two urban commons, l’Asilo and Àgora. By examining their contrasting approaches to participation and decision-making, I have argued that class backgrounds fundamentally condition the meanings and practices of care within activist spaces. In l’Asilo, the focus on deliberative processes and consensus privileges intellectual engagement, creating a dynamic where care is often articulated but less frequently practiced. In Àgora, care manifests as unspoken, embodied labor performed predominantly by those facing intersecting marginalizations, without formal deliberative mechanisms to distribute this burden equitably but recognizing leadership to those who do. These dynamics underscore how class mediates not only access to participation but also the very forms and languages of care and democracy.

The composition of commoners and the shared understandings about who is more entitled to take decisions appeared particularly relevant. On the one hand, l’Asilo’s activists identified as “immaterial” workers of arts and culture. Àgora’s subjects, instead, were more clearly the “caring classes” (Graeber 2018). In a separate study, Luca Cigna and I (2024) have looked quantitatively at those subjects who value caring the most and we demonstrated that they share a few elements of marginalization, such as gender, race, migrant background, as well as experience in organizing, and working in a care job. The “caring classes,” we suggested, could be a useful framework to reframe an intersectional “working class” apt to our times. It looks to

me that, in Àgora, the caring classes are more clearly the political subjects than in l'Asilo. This, in turn, explains the democratic importance given to care in Àgora.

The more unspoken ways in which caring is central to Àgora's management and decision-making is consistent with Lagalisse's (2024) explanation of the contrasts between working-class and people of color cultures and the typical middle-class activists "consensus processes."<sup>63</sup> She convincingly argues that because working-class people—contrary to the middle-classes—cannot and are not used to outsource conflicts to legal or bureaucratic systems, they must often rely on direct, often unspoken forms of consensus anchored in emotional display (Kraus et al., 2010; Skeggs, 2011). Their precarity compels them, for example, to read situations, material issues but even facial expressions quickly and coordinate solutions face-to-face, as no institutional cushion softens everyday crises.

Still, it seems to me that neither Àgora nor l'Asilo fully embody the principles of care democracy or that of a "feministization" of politics. The feminist project to de-gender care and enable deliberation about caring alongside caring ways to deliberate remains elusive in both contexts. Instead, l'Asilo and Àgora present a stark contrast: l'Asilo privileges the rhetoric of care without fully integrating it into its democratic practices, while Àgora's everyday practices of care largely sidestep theoretical deliberation. This divergence highlights the broader tension between spoken and unspoken care, and between the ideals and realities of democratic participation.

A key theoretical implication of this chapter concerns the limits of prefiguration in care democracy. While activists may strive to model in the present the kind of politics they envision for a more just society, the success of care democracy, just like deliberative democracy, hinges on broader conditions of social and care equality. Without systemic transformations, the ideals of care democracy risk being undermined by the very inequalities they aim to address. Practices of care and deliberation often presuppose levels of equity that are absent in deeply stratified societies (della Porta & Rucht, 2013; Tronto, 2013). This critique applies to both l'Asilo and Àgora, where material inequalities and uneven distributions of caregiving labor shape their limitations as democratic commons.

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<sup>63</sup> Some have critiqued consensus decision-making for its potential to exclude marginalized groups, particularly people of colour. Polletta (2005) explains how participatory democracy "became" white.

In sum, this chapter argues that class mediates the possibilities and contradictions of care politics in urban commons. While both l'Asilo and Àgora reveal the transformative potential of care as a democratic principle, they also expose the structural barriers to its full realization. These findings not only challenge idealized notions of care democracy but also call for deeper engagement with the material and relational conditions that sustain collective life. By comparing these two cases, I argue that the form care takes—and the way democracy is practiced around it—cannot be separated from the embodied class dispositions of those involved. The politics of care is always situated, and always shaped by the social, material, and affective inequalities that commons cannot simply transcend. If commons are laboratories for new democratic forms, they are also mirrors that reflect the contradictions and exclusions of the world they seek to change.

But class does not only shape care within activist groups. It also marks the boundaries between commoners and those on the outside. Who belongs, who decides, and what kind of care is owed to those who are not core activists? The next chapter turns to these questions by ethnographically comparing a few paradigmatic encounters in both l'Asilo and Àgora.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Care for the Neighborhood: Security, Exclusion and Boundaries of Urban Commons**

#### **1. Introduction**

In Chapter 6 I argued that class dispositions shape how care and democracy materialize within urban commons. L'Asilo's preference for lengthy deliberation vis-à-vis Àgora's hands-on caretaking showed that care politics is both filtered through material inequalities and embodied histories. That insight sets the stage for the present chapter, which goes beyond care among activists and instead shifts the lens outward, by investigating how each commons engages its immediate neighborhood, and how porous boundaries are drawn and redrawn. Indeed, the politicization of care by urban commons movement is not limited to the dimensions underlined so far. Activists at l'Asilo and Àgora not only cared for one another, for the non-human elements of the commons, and for broader societal issues. They also cared for the neighborhood, as their immediate, geographical arena of political action. In fact, in commons theory, locals are the most important stakeholders of an urban commons. Yet, in practice, this does not need to be always the case: activists are not necessarily the typical neighbors, and neighbors can relate in many different ways to the commons. In other words, the overlap between activists and neighbors is often uneven, and the boundary between urban commons and neighborhood is therefore dynamic and contested.

Care for the neighborhood acquires a particularly interesting dimension in the specific neighborhoods where this ethnography unfolds. As readers can recall from Chapter 3, both commons are situated in socio-economically distressed and historically marginalized neighborhoods. Not far from their respective cities' ports, they have both been characterized by forms of smuggling, casual and sex work, street vending, and other forms of informal economies; activities carried on by an urban underclass, or lumpenproletariat, focused on everyday survival at the edges of society. In these neighborhoods a thick social texture coexists with structural violence (materialized through house evictions, sustained police presence, and so on), poverty, marginalization, more or less organized illegal activities, and, at times, forms of street violence (Belmonte, 2012; Fernández González, 2022). This legacy coexists, today, with increasingly aggressive forms of gentrification, touristification, and policing, creating

tensions that urban commons movements cannot isolate from. Hence, this chapter investigates the relationship of the urban commons with their neighborhoods and their inhabitants, and more generally with outsiders. Broadly, the chapter asks: how do urban commons activists articulate and practice care towards outsiders?

This main question opens important sub-questions: who gets to be an insider and who remains an outsider of urban commons? In other words, what are the boundaries of the community of commoners? Who draws them, and how? Famously, Elinor Ostrom's first design principle of sustainable commons is the one of having "clearly identified boundaries" (Ostrom, 1990). By contrast, Stavros Stavrides argues that the emancipatory potential of urban commons lies in their openness; he recasts common space as a *threshold*: a liminal zone that both separates and connects, demanding porous rather than gated practices (Stavrides, 2015, 2023). Building on this debate, urban commons scholars highlight a core tension between openness and exclusion: cities oblige commoners to keep spaces porous enough for strangers yet bounded enough for safety (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Dellenbaugh et al., 2015; Huron, 2017). Some boundary negotiations arise from overt security concerns (threats, violence, fear) while others hinge on moral fit or resource use. The cases that follow illustrate both. L'Asilo's activists embrace this idea by calling themselves a "porous community," explicitly rejecting inward closure. Yet managing porosity entails both explicit and implicit choices. This chapter therefore traces the complex negotiations through which commoners try to stay as open and inclusive as possible but cannot practically and materially be totally and indiscriminately so. Studies note that commons boundaries are often "porous and osmotic" (Polko, 2025), but rarely follow the doorkeepers, key-holders or neighbors who keep those boundaries pliable. The pages that follow do so, showing how l'Asilo and Àgora enact porosity through everyday acts of care, conflict and compromise.

Activists of both l'Asilo and Àgora expressed, time and again (in assemblies, interviews, private conversations), that care for the neighborhood had to be (in l'Asilo) or was (in Àgora) a clear political commitment. Guided by the normative ethical and political imperative of taking care of it and its marginalized inhabitants, both urban commons aspired to function, to different extents, as neighborhood care infrastructures (Alam & Houston, 2020; Gutierrez Sanchez, 2023). In order to be such a thing, a basic requirement was to be as open as possible. Actually, scholars have highlighted aspirations of this kind for occupied spaces in cities across time and space, highlighting how, in the framing and use of squatted space, openness is

virtually always a key ideological and strategic element (De Moor, 2016; Thörn, 2012; Uitermark, 2004).

Nonetheless, scholarship shows that the celebrated ideal of openness is always qualified. De Moor (2016) shows that squatters must ration access because unchecked openness can backfire when spaces are overused or abused (a congruent point to Ostrom's design principles), and that the rules for doing so emerge less from formal deliberation than from on-the-spot improvisation. Hence, despite a discourse and attempt to openness, reality requires limiting it, and criteria for doing so are needed. Chapter 5 illustrated a similar dynamic during the pandemic, when the Firanda restrictions forced activists to decide who would, and would not, be cared for. Yet, this chapter does not focus on a specific episode, but focuses on the routines, practices, and yardsticks through which urban commons movements negotiate thresholds of inclusion and exclusion. While De Moor (2016) lists familiarity and personal or ideological affinity as typical filters, he also notes that his evidence (of two case studies) is hardly representative. My two sites partly diverge and thus extend his argument. Indeed, my two cases do not fully confirm familiarity and identification as key mechanisms, though some elements of them might be present. I anticipate here the main criteria I identified for l'Asilo and Àgora (which will be explored in depth in the rest of this chapter).

L'Asilo explicitly rejects any test of personal or ideological identification: "l'Asilo is not a collective, it is a commons!" was a recurrent phrase. The artist group that first occupied the building dissolved itself and transferred authority to a weekly open assembly "to ensure that the commons would be genuinely open, horizontally structured, democratic, and conducive to commoning practices" (Velotti et al., 2025, p. 289). In principle, only fascists, racists or sexists are banned; yet even these red lines would prove hard to draw unanimously. A further tellingly inclusive policy of l'Asilo forbids curatorial gatekeeping: l'Asilo has no artistic direction and does not exclude for quality-based judgments. Finally, as I will show in the chapter, even when really brought to the limit, with vandalic excursions or peoples or groups breaking the three basic principles, activists struggled to block anyone from entering the space, and (as the reader at this point of the thesis might well enough expect) engaged in complex and long debates on inclusion as care.

In the wall next to the entrance to the space of Àgora (see Figure 3 in Chapter 3), the text recounting the history, meaning and functioning of the space ends with an exclusion warning,

by claiming that Àgora “is NOT a space for speculation and in it there is NO space for sexism (*machismo*) nor any other form of violence and discrimination.” As I will show in the rest of the chapter, the expulsion of people engaging in violent behaviors was mostly real but, as suggested by De Moor, the interpretation of those general principles was often improvised on an everyday basis by those responsible of doing *permanencias* (“shifts”) than thoroughly discussed in assemblies. In other words, as with virtually all issues, l’Asilo and Àgora differed deeply in terms of deliberation: while l’Asilo spent uncountable hours in assemblies to discuss the exclusion of groups or individuals (to my knowledge, virtually never reaching consensus), in Àgora it was more mixed: the exclusion of collectives was discussed in assemblies (indeed, the longest assemblies were about this), but individual exclusions were mostly implicit agreed and somewhat improvised. What is sure is that, during my fieldwork, boundary work (the ongoing definition and maintenance of who and what belongs to the commons, as introduced in Chapter 1) was a central and recurrent one for both commons.

After this introduction, Section 2 lays the comparative groundwork. I start by mapping the basic yet telling routines of opening, closing, and key circulation in Àgora and l’Asilo. These everyday gestures reveal how each collective balances openness with security, and how material arrangements translate into subtle hierarchies of responsibility. A short excursion into the socio-economic backgrounds of insiders and outsiders already hints at the class tensions that surface later. Section 3 remains in Naples and delves into l’Asilo’s fraught encounter with its neighborhood. Through a thick ethnographic vignette of the first l’Asilo’s assembly I assisted to, I trace how activism grounded in artistic cosmopolitanism collides with local subproletarian life. The section dissects successive confrontations with *ragazzini* (“young kids”) and *ragazzoni* (“old kids”), showing how gender, class, and language entangle, and how intersectional care is tested when safety and openness pull in opposite directions. Section 4 shifts to Barcelona’s Raval and follows Àgora through skirmishes over violence, drug use, and controversies over institutionally backed workers. Three relationships structure the analysis: the daily interactions with recently arrived migrant men who find shelter in the garden; the protracted stand-off with the Remadies cooperative and their feminist harm-reduction work; and the clash with Fogons Rebels, whose vegan mutual aid dinners stumbled with the neighborhood’s complexity. By tracking who is asked to leave and who is let to stay, the section exposes divergent logics of care and their classed moral economies. Section 5 (Discussion and Conclusion) knits the comparative threads and offers some final thoughts. Overall, this chapter shows that, whether improvised or deliberate, decisions over boundaries are always (classed)

care dilemmas, and the practices, routines, and judgments through which communities negotiate these thresholds are *boundary care infrastructures*.

## **2. Opening and Closing: Keys, Routines, Hierarchies**

As previously discussed, urban commons are not entirely open spaces by definition. At the most basic level, both a building like l'Asilo and a garden enclosed by a brick wall like Àgora required someone to physically open and close the gates. L'Asilo, consistent with the principle of prefigurative spontaneity outlined in Chapter 5, did not follow fixed opening or closing hours. It opened whenever the first person arrived in the morning and closed when the last person left at night. Efforts were generally made to close by midnight to avoid disturbing nearby residents. Àgora, by contrast, operated with clearly defined hours during the period of my fieldwork. On weekdays, it opened daily at 17:00 and closed at 21:00. Weekend access followed a different pattern, with openings limited to specific events such as book presentations, movement assemblies, concerts, or community celebrations.

A practical issue for both spaces, and arguably for all self-managed or squatted spaces, was that of key management. Because of its size, l'Asilo required multiple keys for different areas. The entrance gate had one key, the large wooden front door another, and each internal space, such as the cinema, theater, and library, had its own. Metal doors were installed in previous years specifically to improve control over internal access and prevent unwanted intrusions. During my fieldwork, the library and its study rooms were experimenting with a number lock system. Individuals who were more involved knew the code and could access the space, while complete strangers could not. The most secured room in the building, which housed computers and servers, also contained sets of keys for nearly every space in l'Asilo. However, individuals could also possess keys to specific rooms. For example, someone deeply involved with the theater might hold both the main entrance key and the theater key. Keys circulated informally among activists. This sometimes led to logistical issues. It was not uncommon to see urgent messages on the Telegram chat, such as: "Urgent! Who has a cinema key? We need to open it for the screening in one hour." These recurring problems often prompted renewed attempts to reorganize key distribution. Over the years, various efforts were made to systematize access through shared documents and procedures, but none had ever proven fully effective. At times, proposals were made to install electric locks and coded entry systems. However, the cost and complexity of such upgrades prevented their implementation. In practice, access to l'Asilo

remained largely self-organized. This system generally functioned, though inconsistently, and conferred both autonomy and responsibility upon those who held keys. For instance, one activist who lived near l'Asilo had a full set of entrance keys. Few people knew this, since she preferred to avoid being contacted frequently in emergency situations. In contrast, a younger activist, a university student with more time, energy, and willingness, became an informal point of reference. Everyone knew that, as a last resort, they could call on him to open the gate.

In Àgora, key management was simpler, as only two keys were required: one for the external gate and one for the small wooden hut (*caseta*), where more valuable items were stored. When I first arrived, the keys were kept at a nearby café located about five minutes away on foot. If someone needed to access the space outside the café's business hours (as I often did for the gardening project) that was the place to go. After some time, however, responsibility for the keys was transferred to Lucio, a man living in and caring for a ground-floor store (*bajo/almacén*) directly across from Àgora. He was almost always present, with the shutter open. If he was not available at opening time, one could knock; if he was absent at closing time, the keys could be dropped inside through a small hole. This arrangement occasionally generated tensions, particularly when misunderstandings arose or time agreements were not respected. At times, people relied on Lucio without informing him, leading to mutual frustration and crossed accusations. The situation became even easier when one or two people began sleeping in the space. Àgora functioned as a shelter for them, as they faced challenges securing other housing options. In exchange, they contributed to the care of the space, managed openings and closings, and helped maintain a continuous presence.

### **3. Negotiating Porosity in l'Asilo: Class, Safety, and Intersectional Tensions**

#### **3.1 Ethnographic Intro To l'Asilo**

The ethnographic starting point for this chapter is my first-ever assembly at l'Asilo, held on September 27, 2021, at 7:00 p.m. The meeting focused on the relationship with the neighborhood and, more specifically, on issues related to violence. I had been invited by Bruna, an actress and l'Asilo activist, who also happened to be Pietro's housemate. I arrived early and spent the first 45 minutes smoking anxiously, trying to make eye contact without being intrusive, and feeling uneasy about participating in an assembly where I did not know anyone. Bruna had not yet arrived. As people gradually gathered on the terrace where the meeting was to take place, I did my best to blend in. The assembly finally began around 7:45 p.m. Irene,

who was sitting next to me, introduced herself and asked who I was. I told her I had just arrived in Naples. I had planned to formally introduce myself as a researcher to the group, but just as I was about to speak, Gianmarco began moderating the discussion, which had already been described as a dense and important one. I decided to postpone my introduction.<sup>64</sup> Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, l'Asilo had adopted a hybrid model for assemblies, allowing activists who did not feel safe attending in person to participate remotely. This was made possible through an advanced streaming system that included a small camera-and-microphone robot with a spaceship-like shape, which they affectionately referred to as the "U.F.O." It was moved around the circle to ensure that online participants could follow the discussion.

The first topic raised in the assembly was a proposal from an older man who appeared largely unfamiliar to the activists. He suggested organizing tango workshops in the space. While some participants responded positively, others expressed frustration and posed a series of practical questions: When would the workshops take place? How would they be organized? How many people would participate? What measures would be taken regarding COVID-19? Would there be an entry fee? The man offered vague responses, prompting the assembly to refer him to the Performing Arts table and ask that he return the following day with clearer information.

The assembly then turned to the most pressing issue: a violent incident that had taken place the previous day involving several neighbors. A German visitor, who had casually entered l'Asilo, took a photograph from one of the windows overlooking the building across the street, which, like many in Naples, had a picturesque appearance marked by hanging laundry and glimpses into domestic life. These details often attract the attention of outsiders but can feel intrusive to residents. At that exact moment, a young woman happened to be using the bathroom and felt her privacy had been violated. She reported the incident to her parents, and within minutes, a group of angry neighbors from her building and others gathered in the street to confront l'Asilo's activists. By then, the German man had already left. The confrontation quickly escalated. Mario, a long-standing activist often seen by outsiders as the public face or even the "boss" of l'Asilo, became the primary target. A large man, described as tall and weighing around 100 kilograms, arrived wielding a baseball bat and threatened to kill him. Mario, along with others, particularly Alice, was subjected to a barrage of insults and death threats. The threat of violence, activists remarked, was not to be taken lightly, and many claimed it was

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<sup>64</sup> I finally introduced myself as a researcher and presented my PhD project a couple of assemblies later.

fortunate that nothing more serious had occurred. Mario got away with his shirt torn apart and a very scary moment, but it could easily have ended in someone being stabbed, someone observed.

Mario was not present at the assembly. He had stated that he chose not to attend in order to avoid exerting too much influence over the decisions that were to be made, given that he had been the main target of the incident. However, several activists remarked that his absence might also be due to shock and fear, and emphasized that this was a time in which he needed collective support and care. The discussion that followed the brief summary of the events was long, intense, and deeply engaged. Care was not only discussed as an abstract principle, but placed at the core of the political reflection. In particular, the debate focused on whether and how it might be possible to rebuild a caring relationship with the surrounding neighborhood—one that many acknowledged had eroded over time. A wide range of interpretations of the incident was voiced, along with multiple proposals regarding what kind of response would be most appropriate. What quickly emerged, however, was that the neighbors' anger was only marginally provoked by the tourist's photograph. For many in the assembly, it was clear that the photo had simply triggered a reaction rooted in a deeper and longer-standing disconnect between l'Asilo's community and the surrounding residents.

A commonly shared view was that noise and sound disturbances had been a persistent source of tension. Complaints had been raised for years about actors rehearsing, conversations happening outside the gate, or the repeated slamming of the door. Although activists were well aware of these dynamics, the problem persisted. Some neighbors, particularly during the warmer months, struggled to enjoy quiet moments or even to watch television peacefully with their windows open. This posed a recurring dilemma within l'Asilo. Keeping the windows closed could be seen as a gesture of care toward the neighbors, yet several activists pointed out that this would not be a caring act toward those inside the building, particularly in a pandemic context that required ventilation. On the other hand, leaving the windows open made it easier for rehearsals, performances, and music to reach the surrounding buildings. In the assembly, older proposals resurfaced. Some suggested revisiting the idea of setting up tents as an intermediate solution, while others proposed installing a sound-dampening device on the metal gate. These ideas, although not new, gained renewed urgency in light of the escalation with the neighbors.

A major point of contention arose between two possibilities: some, like Gianmarco, argue that it is time to stop all activities at l'Asilo due to the recent aggression against a comrade and the danger this poses (as I have showed in previous chapters, this would only be the first of many times in which a total closure was suggested). On the other hand, those who opposed stopping all activities argued that this would send the message that violence and aggression worked. Something that, it was argued, was already a belief held by many in the neighborhood. Also, it would have meant canceling concerts and exhibitions that people had worked hard to organize. Some proposed hanging outside of the building a banner against violence and aggression, while others argued that this was a time for reflection and silence, with the possibility of restoring dialogue with the neighborhood in the future. But everyone agreed that the relationship with the neighborhood needed change.

One of the reasons identified for the current tension was a widespread sense that the internal community at l'Asilo had weakened. This internal crisis, as discussed in previous chapters, would deepen further in the months that followed. In the past, it was customary for all activities to pause on Monday evenings at 7 p.m. so that everyone could attend the assembly. At the time of this discussion, however, it had become increasingly common for people working in the theater or the armory to continue their activities while the assembly was taking place. Several participants argued that this practice should end and called for a return to the norm of prioritizing the assembly over other uses of the space. The perceived fragmentation of the community (intensified by the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic) was considered a key factor in the worsening of relations with the neighborhood. Longtime activists who had returned to l'Asilo specifically for this assembly recalled past efforts to build connections with local residents through letters, invitations, and public gestures. Most of these initiatives had yielded little response, although a few individual neighbors had developed friendly ties with the space and were seen as potential allies in helping to restore a minimum degree of mutual trust.

But was noise or other forms of disturbance really the deeper cause of this disconnection between activists and neighbors? And why did the two groups appear to see themselves as clearly distinct entities? As noted earlier, a small number of activists had grown up in the surrounding area, but this was far from typical. Upon closer reflection, it became increasingly evident to me that class differences, particularly in terms of cultural capital, played a significant role. As shown in the previous chapter, most of l'Asilo's activists were highly educated and

oriented toward forms of cultural expression that reflected specific aesthetic and political sensibilities. This created a barrier that went beyond practical habits or values. It shaped what was considered meaningful, legitimate, or worth attending. Events such as experimental music performances, independent film screenings, and refined theatrical productions often attracted university students, artists, and intellectuals from across the city, but rarely appealed to the building's neighbors. The distance was not only cultural but also linguistic. While l'Asilo operated primarily in Italian, many local residents spoke Neapolitan, a language that carries the weight of class stigma and lacks formal recognition. Most activists could understand and speak Neapolitan, and they used it in interactions with people from the neighborhood. However, it was not the language commonly spoken in assemblies or everyday exchanges within the space. As a researcher unfamiliar with Neapolitan, I experienced this linguistic separation directly. I often struggled to follow conversations among neighbors or between neighbors and activists. Despite these barriers, broader urban processes such as gentrification and turistification, combined with the porous structure of l'Asilo, increasingly brought members of the neighborhood into the space. These dynamics gave rise to politically complex dilemmas around care, which I explore in the following section.

### **3.2 The Neighborhood In l'Asilo**

As uncomfortable as it was to attend my first assembly at l'Asilo while such a delicate and emotionally charged issue was being discussed, the topic was revealing. From the outset, it exposed the complex relationship between l'Asilo's activists and the surrounding neighborhood, and set the stage for a series of dense conversations on boundaries, violence, and safety that would intensify over the ten months of my fieldwork. In the months that followed, l'Asilo experienced growing incursions into its building and outdoor areas by two distinct groups of local residents who came to be referred to within the space as the "young kids" (*ragazzini*) and the "old kids" (*ragazzoni*).

The *ragazzini* were groups of minors, generally between the ages of twelve and eighteen, who increasingly used the building to hang out, play cards, smoke, talk, and, at times, engage in vandalism. These acts often targeted artworks, walls, and occasionally users of the space. Most of these young people were no longer in school and came from precarious family contexts. Many had fathers in prison, and some had spent time themselves in juvenile detention. Their presence reflected broader patterns of marginalization and structural abandonment. While activists often experienced their behavior as disruptive, it was also shaped by the absence of

support systems in their everyday lives. Throughout my fieldwork, several incidents involving *ragazzini* sparked heated debates among activists over how to respond. In time, a dedicated working group emerged under the label of “social arts,” with the aim of organizing pedagogical and caring activities, often described in activist terms as “community education” (*educativa territoriale*). The goal was to establish a meaningful relationship with the kids and prevent destructive dynamics while also engaging in direct forms of social intervention (Bosi and Zamponi, 2015). After considerable internal debate, the assembly agreed to hire two young professionals from the neighborhood using residual funds from earlier projects. Activists acknowledged that the community itself lacked the resources and skills to carry out such demanding social work on a fully voluntary basis. The two workers selected shared a similar social background with the *ragazzini*, a background widely described as “subproletarian” and associated with the “famous Neapolitan urban subproletariat,” as more than one activist put it. Although minor incursions by children had occurred at earlier stages in l’Asilo’s history, older activists emphasized that a new phenomenon was also emerging: the steady and more structured presence of what they began referring to as the “old kids.”

L’Asilo’s activists referred to as *old kids* a group of older men from the neighborhood, mostly in their thirties and forties. The label carried an implicit infantilization, which reflected activists’ ambivalence toward the group. Over time, the *old kids* began to gather regularly at the entrance and, as winter advanced, in a basement space that had previously been used primarily as a storage area by l’Asilo’s community. Most of them were affiliated with a dissident subgroup within Naples’ broader football hooligan scene. Occasionally, they were referred to by their “official” name rather than by the more informal *old kids*. Although their behavior was generally less destructive than that of the younger *ragazzini*, this group provoked even greater tensions. Unlike with minors, activists did not consider an educational or pedagogical approach to be viable. These were adults from the neighborhood who often embodied a confrontational interaction style, shaped partly by their involvement in hooligan culture. What troubled activists most, however, were the overt expressions of sexism. One common stance, for example, was a refusal to speak to women. In other instances, the group insisted on speaking only with l’Asilo’s supposed “boss” whenever conflicts arose. Activists repeatedly had to explain that decisions were made collectively in the assembly and that there was no hierarchical structure. These explanations often led to further discussion, but they rarely eliminated the pressure to personalize authority. Their growing presence around the entrance caused significant discomfort among many activists and visitors, particularly women and queer

people. It also increased the amount of daily work needed to maintain the space. At night, when l'Asilo typically closed around midnight, it was common for activists to organize in groups to ensure that the *ragazzini* and *ragazzoni* would leave the building. This was rarely straightforward. The group regularly proposed that activists hand them the keys, offering to close the space themselves after finishing their card games. The request was consistently rejected. In the background of these discussions were circulating fears about possible links to organized crime. Concerns were voiced about whether the group might use l'Asilo's building to store illicit materials, engage in drug-related activity, or create informal control over certain spaces. However, there was broad agreement among activists that these men were not powerful actors. They were not connected to high-ranking criminal networks or dominant factions in the city's football scene. Rather, they were recognized as a relatively powerless group of unemployed subproletarians from the neighborhood, occupying a marginal and ambivalent position within the space.

The situation raised a constant stream of ethical and political dilemmas for l'Asilo's activists. Many felt deeply unsettled, yet few knew how or where to begin addressing the problem. There was a widespread and, in many ways, justified fear that control of the space was slipping away. Day by day, the building seemed to be falling into the hands of others. A physical confrontation between a group of arts-oriented activists and a group of adult hooligans was never considered a viable option. As a result, assemblies were marked by recurring, often heated, discussions about the perceived decline of l'Asilo. Several participants noted that "the whole city" was now aware that the space was deteriorating. It was becoming increasingly unsafe and unpleasant as a venue for assemblies, artistic events, theater rehearsals, or solidarity activities with migrants. Many feared that, sooner or later, the space would be lost entirely—first to the hooligans, and eventually to the city administration, which would likely reclaim control, or more likely, abandon it altogether.

Within the activist community, two broad orientations began to emerge. On one side were those prepared to install surveillance cameras, pressure the administration to carry out an eviction, and, although it was only mentioned as a last resort, consider calling the police. Their argument was layered but, in essence, rested on a shared view that these were not individuals who could be reasoned with. They were perceived as adult men who enacted sexist and violent behaviors, potentially linked to organized crime, and accustomed to asserting control through intimidation. According to this position, any space or legitimacy that activists allowed them to

occupy would be taken permanently, never voluntarily returned. Activists aligned with this view argued that it was naïve to believe a respectful or transformative relationship could be built. These were not children reacting to structural exclusion but grown men choosing to act in ways seen as incompatible with the feminist, left-wing, and non-violent ethos that defined l'Asilo's prefigurative politics.

On the other side, there was what could be described as the more libertarian position. Activists in this camp were strongly opposed to installing surveillance cameras, relying on the municipal administration, or calling the police into the space. They rejected the idea that the group's violence was intrinsic. Instead, they viewed it as a survival tactic employed by people who had been systematically excluded and offered little else with which to construct meaningful or hopeful lives. From this perspective, the behaviors in question were not expressions of personal pathology but the outcomes of long histories of structural neglect and social stigmatization. These activists argued that, as grassroots left-wing organizers, their political responsibility was to take the side of such marginalized groups. As predominantly middle-class people producing experimental art and culture in a subproletarian neighborhood, the least they could do was betray their own class position, as Hunter (2022) suggests, and attempt to forge relationships of mutual respect with the subaltern groups born and raised in that context. Part of this group also raised critical concerns about the symbolic dimension of classism within l'Asilo. The group's self-assigned "official" name referenced an aggressive animal, and whether they were called by that label or referred to as "old kids," their identities were being distorted through either animalization or infantilization. The spatial dynamics reinforced these hierarchies. Their meeting place was located underground, in a part of the building previously used as a deposit. This spatial configuration contributed to a material and symbolic separation between activists and neighborhood residents.

Giorgio, one of the activists in this second position, gave his thoughts on the matter during our interview, highlighting many points of tension:

The issue of the new relationship with the neighborhood enters a new phase after the pandemic. Before the pandemic, the characteristic of the relationship with the neighborhood was the occasional incursions of problematic—well, I don't like this expression—let's say children who had not found a place in the city space. They came in waves, so there were periods of the year when they arrived, basically those that coincided with the closure of schools, school holidays, etc., which we solved by

implementing projects such as the “Green Meadow” educational and social projects, etc. In this new phase, however, after the pandemic, the relationship with this more complicated, more complex, and less easy-to-face part of the neighborhood has a different nature because it is stationary. That is, what happened with the pandemic is that many of these kids were completely expelled from school, so there is no longer the problem that they come at Christmas, Easter, and in the summer, because they are *always* outside of school. Many of the older ones (*ragazzoni*) have lost their usual spatial places in the city because, in the meantime, the return of tourists has amplified, canceling out those empty spaces where they had the experience and use of space. I am not going to judge what kind of use of space they made, but in any case, they were... the whole historic center was dotted with spaces for residents. After the pandemic, these spaces disappear.

The passage above identifies the pandemic and mass tourism as two macro-level drivers of transformation in Naples’ historic center. These forces have contributed to processes of touristification and gentrification that, arguably with some delay compared to other European metropolises, have displaced poorer residents from central urban areas (see Esposito, 2023). While, at the time of my fieldwork, many longtime residents still lived in the historic center, the public spaces around them (streets, squares, stairs, etc.) had become increasingly privatized, occupied by bars and pizzerias catering to tourists. Most activists at l’Asilo shared Giorgio’s interpretation of these dynamics, which was discussed repeatedly in assemblies.

Giorgio went on:

The outdoor courtyard of l’Asilo and the empty basement become that emptiness that is never empty in such intense urban centers, and therefore these kids begin to use the space in many ways that are incompatible with the use that this community, the one that identifies as a community of inhabitants and of reference of l’Asilo, is making now. The new fact is that younger children and adults expelled from other parts of the city enter the broader sphere of the reference community of l’Asilo, because they also are reference community of l’Asilo, because they inhabit the courtyard that borders l’Asilo, and they live it in ways that create problems, but they inhabit this space, and this reference community of l’Asilo, which cannot be reduced to the community that takes care of the space, is the challenge that we have in front of us now.

Here, Giorgio raised a more controversial point. He suggested that the community of reference for l’Asilo might not only include the activists who take care of the space, but also the new users who spend time there in problematic ways. This position stands in some tension with his

earlier reflections and would not be widely accepted within the community. After all, l'Asilo defines itself as a community of commoners engaged in the collective care of a shared urban commons. Within commons theory, the distinction between a common good and an open-access resource depends precisely on this point: a commons is maintained by a specific community through ongoing practices of care and self-management. From that perspective, those who merely make use of the space without participating in its maintenance are not commoners in any meaningful sense. They are not considered part of the community of reference. Giorgio, however, might respond by insisting that use itself is the origin of commons, and that these men, by occupying and appropriating the space, had in fact created a form of engagement. In his view, they were not simply outsiders or intruders; they were also users of a shared resource and, for that reason, had a stake in it.

Giorgio went on to argue for a more fundamental rethinking of how l'Asilo relates to what he called the urban plebs:

And this is the new phase of the relationship with the neighborhood, and here too the theme is whether this is an opportunity to rethink, probably in non-colonial and non-welfarist terms, the relationship with the urban plebs (because they are urban plebs!): street vendors, people who do not work, who live day by day, who are not literate, not educated, etc. This is the challenge we have ahead, and there are many questions, and we need to understand how to do it. It is clear that we know we cannot improvise, that this intervention must be structured, and we cannot... The dead end we are in is that we cannot think of expelling this piece of the community, nor can we pretend nothing is happening and have patience until the storm passes [...] we need to find a way of coexistence that will change us and, hopefully, also change them, or they will change and, hopefully, we will change too, because the closures exist on both sides.

Also, Giorgio's position was not only grounded in ethical and strategic concerns about exclusion, but also in a political analysis of the structural conditions shared by activists and the neighborhood's subaltern groups. Despite deep cultural, behavioral, and linguistic differences, he pointed to a commonality of lived pressures. As he put it:

However, what I see is that we have common issues with this part of the city: we are both communities under the pressure of tourist exploitation, and commercialization of urban space, and we are both under the pressure of increasing rent prices due to property tax. We are all facing expulsion, and if we lose the use of this space, this space will become [...] a center of beauty, a

swimming pool, a gym, because this is the model... Or it will become something related to shepherds, to tourism, in any case, and we will leave the city, this part of the city, for the same reason why, in reality, without knowing it, we share the same discomfort. How to communicate this discomfort and how to fight together, having completely different vocabularies and practices? There is a distance...

Giorgio's intervention reframed the conflict not simply as a matter of incompatible behaviors, but as a consequence of classed disconnection and the broader politics of urban transformation. He argued that a more honest recognition of class difference within l'Asilo itself was necessary to understand the reactions to the presence of the *ragazzoni*:

This then connects to another element, on the class characterization of the so-called reference community of L'Asilo, because many, but not in a moral judgment, simply do not know that part of the city, because they do not come from the urban subproletariat and therefore have an experience, an existence of life that has never put their lives in contact with these others, neither for class conditions nor for cohabitation in the same neighborhood, schools, etc. And this also creates a difference in approaches between those of us who come from that world. Personally, I come from a working-class family; in these [hooligans] I recognize many of my closest blood relatives, I know the language, but I feel offended when they are labeled in a colonial and racist way, in my opinion, even by the assembly, but I realize that this touches on the class nature and composition... It touches on the class composition, the experience, the world of art, and it goes to another chapter... Who can afford artistic research at this time? Eh... How much rent do you need to have to allow yourself all this time, with assemblies that end at midnight, with completely crazy schedules compared to the ordinary life of someone who has to survive? And so this thing questions us, in my opinion, also to develop a sensitivity from this point of view.

His statement reframed the presence of the *ragazzoni* not as a threat to l'Asilo's values, but as a challenge to reflect on the limits of those values when they remain unmarked by class. Although he did not use the word explicitly, Giorgio was pointing to what many others had described in the assembly as classism. For a small minority within the community, the idea of expelling the group was seen as a paradigmatic example of classist exclusion—the kind of decision that would reproduce the very inequalities l'Asilo sought to resist.

### **3.3 Dilemmas Of Safety, Classism, Intersectionality**

Class alone does not define privilege, and in this context other dimensions such as gender, race, nationality, sexual orientation, and ability further complicate the relationship with the

*ragazzoni*. Although structurally disadvantaged in terms of class and cultural capital, they were all white, heterosexual Neapolitan men who engaged in openly sexist and, at times, racist behavior. These actions clearly violated l'Asilo's core ethical principles. While these principles remain broad and open to interpretation, several activists pointed to the group's explicit sexism as a legitimate reason to advocate for their expulsion. Even Giorgio, who did not explicitly name sexism in his interventions, acknowledged the tensions created by overlapping and conflicting privileges:

[I also don't want to fall] into the opposite privilege, that is, I can sit and drink, smoke with them, calmly, because they recognize me, because I know their language, but when this becomes a form of exercise of privilege that makes me feel good, that is, I can handle it, but there are many who feel attacked and are pushed away, so even from this point of view, sensitivity is needed, and therefore in my opinion this is one of the challenges that I feel I have ahead of me together with a part of the community.

The dilemma faced by the community could be described, in simplified terms, as follows: excluding the hooligans would risk reproducing class-based exclusion, while allowing them to remain would compromise the safety and comfort of others. The space risked becoming unsafe, particularly for women, queer and trans people, and racialized individuals. This was not a theoretical problem. These subjectivities raised concerns directly in assemblies, citing concrete episodes of catcalling, inappropriate comments, intrusive looks, and other forms of discrimination carried out by the ultras. Yet the debate was far from straightforward. Activists' positionalities did not automatically determine their stance. On the contrary, one of the most intense moments in assembly debates occurred when a female activist accused some of l'Asilo's male activists of instrumentalizing the issue of sexism to justify expelling the hooligans—while systematically ignoring or downplaying sexism when it came from within their own group. Her statement triggered defensive reactions from several men, who were offended by the suggestion that their behavior could be equated with that of the hooligans.

These dilemmas cannot be addressed without questioning how the language of “safety” operates within activist cultures. Lagalisse (2016) shows that “safe space” is not a universal condition but a situated expectation. For those who have historically experienced protection and institutional recognition, the idea of safety can feel natural, even unquestioned. Smith (2013) and Leonardo and Porter (2010) have shown how white activists often invoke safety

from a position where protection and comfort are assumed, while many racialized individuals know safety as something more precarious, if not entirely out of reach. Although this example centers on race, the underlying logic applies in other contexts. At l'Asilo, where both activists and marginalized youth were white, similar tensions emerged along lines of class, cultural familiarity, and institutional legibility. What counted as a threat or violation varied significantly depending on one's social position and lived experiences. Lagalisie shows how the language of safety, though rooted in feminist and anti-racist struggles, can become a flexible discursive resource for those who are socially fluent in activist norms. It is often used to define who belongs and who does not. As Bonu (2022) emphasizes, safety is never a fixed state but a relational process, shaped by affect, collective negotiation, and unequal access to emotional and symbolic legitimacy. It is always partial and contingent, produced through ongoing practices of care, conflict, and presence. In this light, debates at l'Asilo over the presence of the hooligans were not simply about concrete behaviors or political principles. They reflected deeper asymmetries over who was able to name harm, whose discomfort was taken seriously, and who could legitimately claim the right to remain.

At the end of my fieldwork, after nearly a year of ongoing debate, the *ragazzoni* were still playing cards in the entrance patio, seeking shade and some fresh air in the summer heat. On one of my last days, I noticed a water tap left running to cool the pavement and suggested turning it off to avoid unnecessary waste. One of their leaders responded by grabbing me by the collar with noticeable aggression. It was a moment in which I experienced, in a very physical way, the difficulty of sharing a commons with people who operate through different languages and codes. The reader might wonder how this situation was ultimately resolved. Many stories of tension, conflict, and perceived lack of safety were recounted to me later, but what matters here is that no one was ever formally expelled from l'Asilo. The younger kids continued to enter the space, at times through new waves of vandalism, while institutional funds were repeatedly allocated to organize activities for them—including theater, karate, and especially a football tournament that had already become a tradition. The older kids continued to use the basement, now with access through a lateral entrance, which limited direct contact between them and the rest of the community. As far as I could tell, this second arrangement was not the result of a formal assembly decision. Rather, it appeared to have emerged informally, in the way described by De Moor (2016), shaped by those who cared for l'Asilo in the day-to-day. In this instance, the usual critique of the “dictatorship of presence” (*dittatura della presenza*) was set aside in favor of pragmatic management by those most involved.

Much more could be said, but for now, it is worth noting that l'Asilo's activists chose, in many ways, to stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016). They addressed episodes of discrimination on a case-by-case basis, without excluding anyone outright. This reflects an ethos of care that engages with contradictions, hierarchies, and forms of domination produced by capital, rather than closing off porous boundaries in pursuit of a simplified notion of safety. The etymology of *sicurezza*, the Italian term that encompasses both safety and security, was raised in several assemblies, including those focused on COVID-19 and the presence of young and older kids. The word derives from the Latin *sine cura*, meaning "without care." In Latin, "care" was closely associated with worry (see Section 1.1 of Chapter 1), so that *security* implied a condition without worry. In this light, l'Asilo's refusal to equate safety with exclusion, and its willingness to remain with discomfort, can be understood as a political commitment to care.

When read alongside a more systematic analysis of my fieldnotes and interviews, and considered through the comparative lens of Barcelona, these issues open space for further theoretical reflection: they call attention to how intersectionality is negotiated in activist settings, how prefigurative politics responds to broader structural conditions, and how the permeability of the commons shapes the possibilities and limits of an ethics of care in the presence of violence.

## **4. Boundaries, Conflict, and Situated Care in Àgora**

### **4.1 To Have *Calle* And Everyday Legitimacy**

The ethnographic departure for Àgora is also, like in l'Asilo, my first assembly in the space. This is telling, as it shows how the themes that will result central for my analysis were visible from the very start. The assembly at Àgora is scheduled on Tuesdays at 19:30. Since attending an assembly for the first time can feel awkward alone (at the end of my first assembly in l'Asilo I had stomach pain because of the nerves), I invite Lollo (who has already been there once), Lou (who lives in front and is quite involved), and Lucía, who has never been there but who eventually decides to come with me.

Lucía and I arrived around 19:40. It was already dark, and there was no obvious sign of a formal assembly. People were scattered around wooden tables among plants; some were drinking beer, others chatting, and a few looking at their phones. Like much of the surrounding neighborhood,

most people appeared to be of North African origin. As we wandered somewhat aimlessly, a woman approached and asked, “Hola! Are you looking for something?” We explained that we were interested in attending the assembly. She asked if we had a proposal to present; we replied that we were simply curious about the space, how it worked, and how to get involved. I decided to mention that a friend had encouraged us to come—Lou had told me to just show up around 19:15, and although he could not attend that day, he said we would be welcome. So I said, “Perhaps you know... Lou?” I immediately realized how important this detail was. Her response changed: “Of course, Lou, he’s a neighbor! He lives right here. He’s very involved and helpful.” Suddenly, we were no longer just outsiders wandering in, but friends of Lou. Later, I reflected on how the interaction could have gone very differently if, for some reason, Lou had not been well regarded. But we were lucky. Her name, as we learned then, was Yennifer.

Yennifer suggests we buy beer at a nearby shop and wait in the garden. After some time, she calls us over affectionately: “Hey, parejita” (“little couple”), “come here, we’re starting the assembly.” She leads us to a small wooden terrace next to a tiny storage shed. At first, I am confused. She is sitting there with a couple of other people, and I am left wondering where the assembly is supposed to happen. I soon realize that this is it—the assembly is made up of those four people, or six if we count Lucía and me, plus another man who participates intermittently. Among the group is a woman of Brazilian origin named María, whom I introduced in the previous chapter. It takes me only a few moments to realize that she is the charismatic figure at the center of the meeting. She speaks the most, and the others listen to her closely. Besides Yennifer, two other women are present: Julia, and a younger woman who remains silent throughout. Apart from a brief attempt to manage an almost illegible handwritten calendar at the start, the assembly is mostly focused on a tense exchange between María and Julia.

Initially, I struggle to grasp the nature of the conflict, but the tension is unmistakable. María seems to direct most of her comments at Lucía and me. She looks at me intently and criticizes people who come to the assembly without contributing to the ongoing work of caring for the space, like repairing broken structures, watering the plants, cleaning the toilets, and sustaining relationships within Àgora. At first, I wonder whether she is offering a kind of warning about future engagement, suggesting that one cannot simply attend assemblies without participating in care work. But I soon realize that her remarks are aimed less at us than at Julia and the

cooperative she represents: Remadies.<sup>65</sup> This kind of indirect communication would continue for months. Remadies is a cooperative based in the neighborhood that works with women and dissident identities (“womxn,” from now on), particularly those who use drugs, through harm reduction practices grounded in an intersectional feminist perspective. Their work is undoubtedly centered on care. Yet María argues that they fail to sustain relationships within the space, because they do not understand what she repeatedly calls the *dinámicas do barrio* (the dynamics of the neighborhood).

The specific issue at stake in this assembly concerns complaints made by a municipal administrator, reportedly alerted by neighbors about noise and episodes of violence at Àgora. María attributes these complaints primarily to conflicts involving womxn associated with Remadies, and she accuses Julia of having failed to manage these situations adequately. Julia defends her position by explaining that the womxn supported by Remadies come to Àgora voluntarily, and that she cannot be held responsible for their behavior. Many, she notes, are navigating mental health challenges. María responds firmly, arguing that while these contexts may explain certain behaviors, they do not justify them. Neighbors, she points out, do not distinguish between people with or without mental health issues. What matters is that neither verbal nor physical violence is acceptable in the space. Those who engage in it are asked to leave and not allowed back in. Expelling violence from the space is, of course, not a structural solution. Violence continues elsewhere, in the street or at home. But it is, María insists, a necessary and achievable step. A self-managed garden in a marginal and difficult neighborhood cannot carry the burden of all social suffering. What it can do is establish a clear boundary: violence is not tolerated here.

This concern reflected, in many ways, the foundational purpose of the space. First, because the lot was occupied in direct response to a brutal police killing that took place on the adjacent street. The goal was not only to honor the memory of the murdered activist, Juan Andrés Benítez, and to support antirepression struggles, but also to create a shelter: a protected community space intended to be as free as possible from different forms of violence. Second, because over its decade of existence, the space had come to be associated with a sense of safety and tranquility. Despite the sustained presence of political events, graffiti, stickers, and

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<sup>65</sup> As I have not interacted systematically as a researcher with this entity, I decided to fully anonymize it: this is a fictitious name.

discourses, and the widespread recognition that Àgora was a political space (a point everyone agreed on in my interviews), it had become less a place for debating political strategies and more a space for community survival grounded in mutual aid. When I asked to more than 20 users, during the participatory video process, what they appreciated most about Àgora, the most frequent response was “to relax” (*para estar tranquilo*). Àgora offered a pause from structural, police, and street violence, as well as from the strain of summer heat waves (Kotsila et al., 2025). Both its symbolic origins and its ongoing function centered on providing moments of relief for those for whom rest is more a privilege than a given. Whether they lacked housing, documents, or experienced addiction, sex work, or a combination of these, Àgora was a place to breathe cooler air and take distance from the weight of systemic violence. Everyone understood that if interpersonal violence erupted inside the space, the police would be more likely to intervene.

In the next sections I develop more systematically some of the themes introduced in the ethnographic vignette of my first assembly at Àgora. I focus on how the assembly addressed questions of violence, safety, and boundaries through its relationship with three groups around whom discussions of inclusion and exclusion often centered. The first were the main “users” of the space, as they were commonly called: fluid and shifting groups of young men, mostly of North African origin, generally undocumented and recently arrived in Spain. They typically spent their afternoons socializing, resting, charging their phones, or heating food in Àgora. They were commonly referred to as *los chavales* (“the guys”). The second group was the Remadies cooperative, whose involvement, as I will show, gave rise to a series of difficult dilemmas. The third was Fogons Rebels,<sup>66</sup> an anarchist, anti-speciesist, and anti-militarist collective that recovered surplus food, cooked it, and served it as a free weekly dinner in Àgora. Both Remadies and Fogons Rebels had withdrawn from Àgora by the end of my fieldwork, after ongoing tensions that led to what might be described as mutually agreed, though conflictual, breakups. Other groups also participated in Àgora and contributed to its life, often in ways that were relevant to care but did not generate conflict or debates about boundaries. These included mothers and grandmothers, often with migratory backgrounds, who brought their children to play in the kids’ area; alternative youth from the neighborhood who came to have a drink in the afternoon; older anarchist activists who attended book launches and

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<sup>66</sup> This is also a fictitious name I chose for the sake of anonymization.

vermuts; and younger activists who joined assemblies, practiced theater, or participated in sessions of the self-managed popular school.

#### 4.2 *Los Chavales In Àgora: Relax As Self-Care*

When María said that they dealt with violent behavior by simply expelling those responsible, I was curious to understand how this worked in practice. At l'Asilo, such decisions had always been more difficult to implement than to discuss. I asked her directly how they managed to keep violent individuals out. She responded calmly and firmly: "We kick them out. If they try to enter again, we keep them out." The blunt clarity of her answer stayed with me. At first, it seemed overly simplistic. But after observing that it did, in fact, work in practice, I began to suspect that legitimacy was the key difference. At l'Asilo, a significant class divide separated most activists from the neighborhood's subproletarian youth, and only a few Neapolitan-speaking activists held any credibility with the *ragazzoni*. In Àgora, by contrast, María appeared to enjoy broad respect. She attributed this to her understanding of what she called the *dinámicas do barrio*. This was something she often criticized Julia for lacking. For María, knowing the *dinámicas do barrio* meant being a *vecina*, a neighbor in a deeper sense. It did not depend on living or working nearby, as Julia did, but on consistent presence in local spaces, collectives, and everyday street life, as well as involvement in tangible forms of community care.

María emphasized that in four years, Julia had not built the kinds of relationships needed to prevent violence, whereas in just one year of activism in Àgora, she had visibly strengthened ties with *los chavales*. These young men had initially been somewhat irascible or irreverent, but through consistent care and firm boundaries, they had become protective of the garden. When conflicts arose, they were now the first to say "No violence in the garden" and to escort people outside if necessary. Their respect for the space became evident in the way tensions were defused quickly, music was turned down as soon as someone asked, and people left quietly when the lights went out around 21:00. The contrast with l'Asilo was significant. There, we often needed as many activists as *ragazzoni* just to close the building at night.

Chavales would make the most use of Àgora, often impatiently waiting for its opening in front of the gate since before 17:00. When it opened, they would take a place in different parts of the garden, usually sitting in groups around different tables. They would use plugs to recharge their phone, make themselves a tea, warm up some food either brought from outside or donated to

Àgora, help each other with various practicalities (bureaucratic issues, needed translations, making appointments). The summer of 2023, mutual barbering activities also proliferated, though it eventually grew so big that limits had to be put, as it was shifting to more and more professionalization, hence creating the conditions for accusations of unfair competition by the many migrant-owned cheap barber shops of the neighborhood. On some occasions, they would also relax by playing domino, ping pong, or pool; activities that also were recurrently stopped if they seemed to generate conflict or attract more competitive (and potentially aggressive) subjects.

Still, not everything functioned smoothly. The billiards table, which had been popular during my early visits, was eventually kept locked most of the time because it triggered too many disputes. Similarly, the self-managed haircut sessions were suspended for the same reason. Despite these occasional problems, most *chavales* consistently expressed respect and gratitude toward the activists who kept the space open, clean, and welcoming. Àgora had not always been so calm, however. Long-standing participants recalled past conflicts among activists and with neighbors. They agreed that a new phase began after the pandemic, first shaped by the presence of the sex workers' collective and later by María's individual leadership, which contributed to a gradual easing of tensions. The shift was often explained by something I heard from several activists: *María tiene mucha calle*, meaning roughly that María understands the street and has lived it. Still, tensions and episodes of aggression continued to arise, particularly during *permanencias* or events organized by the Remadies cooperative. These incidents sometimes involved the drug-using womxn they worked with, and at other times other visitors. It is to this dynamic that I now turn.

#### **4.3 Solidarity Not Charity: The Conflict with Remadies**

The assembly I described earlier in this section was only the first in a series of tense encounters between Àgora's core activists, including María and at least four or five others who regularly attended assemblies, and the Remadies workers. At one assembly shortly after my first, more than 20 people were present. It began with Juan, a long-time activist at Àgora, reading aloud a letter written by a group within the assembly. The letter was a collective request from those involved in *permanencias* (with the exception of Remadies) asking the cooperative to take "a moment of reflection" following the events of the previous Friday.

The main response came from a blonde woman seated two places from me. She spoke with emotion, but also with clarity and composure. She explained that during the Friday *paella* organized by Remadies, which had brought together around twenty womxn, most of them drug users, two women became violent and attacked others, including members of the Remadies collective. These two, she noted, had been causing problems throughout the Raval. Remadies, guided by a libertarian and non-punitive philosophy, refused to exclude them. These women were already excluded from mainstream society and from the neighborhood. To ban them from Remadies would mean abandoning them entirely to the street. While they currently lacked an ethical framework, the aim was to help them develop one. She argued that it was unfair to hold Remadies collectively responsible for the actions of two individuals. These women, she emphasized, happened to move through both Remadies and Àgora. In contrast, the other womxn involved were contributing actively to the space: they cooked, participated in *permanencias*, and were engaged in the collective life of Àgora. According to her, asking Remadies to step back as a whole because of the actions of two people was not only unjustified but counterproductive. These women would continue coming to Àgora regardless, as they lived in the area. What was needed, she argued, was a collective response. Instead of saying “this is your problem,” the real question should be: “how do we face this together?” “How can we strengthen collaboration to prevent this from happening again?”

Others disagreed. They argued that these incidents always occurred during Remadies’ *permanencias* and consistently involved the same group. From their perspective, Àgora needed to protect itself from collapse, and doing so sometimes required exclusion. Throughout the discussion, a nearby space was repeatedly invoked as a cautionary tale. María said, “I hate failure. I don’t want Àgora to end up like that one.” The space in question had been occupied some years earlier to temporarily host migrants, but over time it had shifted toward a heavily charity-based (*asistencialista*) model, marked by problematic power dynamics and even episodes of criminal activity. Eventually, activists had abandoned it, and it came to be cited as a collective failure. The lesson was clear: Àgora had to avoid the same outcome. To do so, red lines had to be maintained. María repeated a story she had shared before. When someone apologizes, saying “sorry, I went too far, please forgive me,” she tells them she does forgive them, but they still cannot return. For her, the exclusion of violent individuals is a practical necessity for keeping Àgora safe. Yennifer introduced herself as a neighbor and *cuidadora* of the space. She emphasized that they knew how to expel violent people, unlike Remadies. María reinforced this point. She explained that she genuinely cared for the neighborhood, kept her

window open all night in case someone needed help, and had often been called to accompany people to the hospital in the middle of the night. She had managed many difficult situations and insisted that she understood the realities of the neighborhood in ways others did not.

The same blonde woman from Remadies responds with a strong, heartfelt appeal to solidarity and care rather than division. She describes a deepening crisis in the neighborhood: drug use is rising, methamphetamine has entered the scene, and the situation is becoming increasingly difficult. Every day, she says, something happens on Robadors, on Rambla del Raval, in their local, or in Àgora itself. Instead of retreating, she proposes stepping forward together. Àgora, in her view, should be repopulated with more people and collectives from the neighborhood. This should not come from a place of fear but from the belief that the space is entering a new phase. Her vision is to relaunch it politically, to make it vibrant again. She suggests limiting the hours that the space is open, while ensuring that every opening corresponds to a collective activity. There should be more people present during open hours, someone at the entrance, and a clear protocol to determine who is allowed in and who is not. At present, someone might be excluded one day and let in by someone else the next. Her concrete proposal is the following: Remadies will close their local and suspend all activities, including those in Àgora, on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Three days without support is already a significant step. This pause will serve both as a signal to users that there are limits and as an opportunity to reflect and build a shared strategy for the challenges ahead. Everyone in the assembly appears to agree. Both those who signed the letter and the members of Remadies commit to reflecting on what was said. In one week, a more grounded and collective decision will be made about the next steps for Àgora.

One week later, at exactly 19:30, people begin to take their seats around the table. For Barcelona, it is a freezing and dark evening. The first item on the agenda is *valoraciones*, meaning a round of reports on what has happened during the week. Yennifer asks, “¿Ha pasado algo esta semana? ¿Ha habido algún conflicto?” (“Did anything happen this week? Was there any conflict?”). I find it significant that the assembly begins by checking for conflict, as if some level of tension is expected. To everyone’s surprise, there are no incidents to report. María confirms that both Thursday, when a lunch and event for homeless people took place (which I attended and found genuinely enjoyable), and Friday, likely referring to Remadies’ *paella* and radio activities, went smoothly. Remadies then presents a written response to the letter they received from part of the assembly the previous week. The letter reaffirms the position they had already expressed. They call for a collective and supportive approach to the recent

challenges, emphasize their role as part of Àgora, and offer to contribute their professional skills during their *permanencias*.

Unfortunately, the conversation does not feel very different from the week before. Most participants seem to fall back into their previous positions. Maryam, a *vecina* who often comes to Àgora with her child and speaks Arabic, is especially confrontational. Since she had not attended the previous assembly, it appears she missed the fact that some progress had been made. She states clearly that she considers Remadies part of Àgora, but also argues that many concessions have been made to them—concessions that others were never offered, including some who were excluded for far less. In her view, this is unfair, especially given the range of vulnerabilities present in the neighborhood. She describes her own situation as a young single mother living in a dark apartment with no natural light, and explains that Àgora functions as an outdoor space for her child. It becomes unsafe, she insists, when she finds syringes on the ground. While she expresses respect for the work Remadies does, she argues that drug use should take place in their own local, not in the garden. Àgora, she insists, is meant to be a space for everyone, and no hierarchy should be imposed between different forms of vulnerability. Her arguments closely resemble those I encountered in l'Asilo. Who is excluded when no one is excluded? What kinds of implicit hierarchies are drawn between different and intersecting forms of oppression?

This concern leads back to a foundational principle that María often reiterated. She insists that she does not care whether the neighborhood is violent, whether people struggle with mental health, or whether conflict happens outside. Àgora, for her, is something different. It is a space where violence does not occur. If it does, the space loses its meaning. At the core of this position is a tension between two ways of understanding what Àgora should be. One sees it as embedded in the contradictions and structural inequalities of the surrounding neighborhood. The other sees it as a prefigurative space that enacts a different kind of world. In this second view, participation depends on the capacity to follow the assembly's decisions and to uphold certain moral and political norms. It also requires a basic ability to listen and speak within an assembly. This, as seen in the case of l'Asilo, was not always guaranteed.

Yet despite these repeated articulations of principle, tensions between Àgora's neighbors and the Remadies cooperative show no sign of easing. The blonde member of Remadies states that she was insulted during a previous assembly. Maryam defends herself by saying she already

apologized. Remedies adds that one of their members was recently targeted with a transphobic slur by a *vecino* from Àgora. He had attended the first part of the current assembly but left midway through. Others agree that such violence cannot be tolerated. At the same time, they note that Àgora is an open space where people with widely varying backgrounds, levels of education, and sensitivities interact. Once again, the central dilemma emerges: how should the assembly decide whether to exclude someone whose behavior may be distressing or harmful to other marginalized identities, but whose own experience of oppression may help explain that behavior? In moments of conflict, whose marginality counts more, and who has the authority to decide?

Time passed, and despite the cold and mounting fatigue, little changed. Remedies proposed a one-week suspension of their activities, but others in the assembly pushed for a longer pause. The meeting ended without resolution. The only concrete outcome was the decision to ban five additional womxn, beyond those already excluded, for particularly aggressive behavior. Broader decisions were postponed. In the months that followed, more assemblies, conflicts, and confrontations unfolded. After several suspensions and even episodes of physical violence, Remedies decided to leave Àgora in the summer of 2023. They did so with a letter accusing the space of failing to uphold feminist values. Most of Àgora's neighbors welcomed their departure and made clear they did not wish for the cooperative to return. While the immediate conflict revolved around incidents of violence and differing approaches to care, the rupture pointed to a deeper political and ethical divide: how to define the boundaries of care, participation, and legitimacy in urban commons.

At the core of this divide was the question of how to navigate overlapping forms of marginalization and vulnerability. Who has a stronger claim to stay in Àgora? A single Moroccan mother living in a dark apartment, who relies on the garden as a safe outdoor space for her child? Womxn with histories of drug use and mental health challenges, who are already excluded from nearly every public and private space? Recently arrived undocumented migrants from North Africa, who sleep in the street, lack access to electricity or bathrooms, and struggle to communicate? A trans person whose experience is deeply unfamiliar to the young men in the square, and who moves through the space with heightened exposure to harm? Or an elderly Catalan neighbor who grew up in the Raval, lives in public housing without air conditioning, and simply wants to play cards, yet feels estranged by the new codes and identities present in the space? These dilemmas echoed those I encountered at l'Asilo, especially in debates about

classism and transfeminism. They cannot be resolved by appealing to an abstract hierarchy of intersecting oppressions, as Lagalisse has argued (2016). Instead, urban commons are confronted with the need for situated, ongoing, and relational judgments. This kind of care does not seek perfection or purity. It is an uncertain and exhausting practice of staying present with conflict, holding space without retreating into fear or closure.

Yet in Àgora, Remadies ultimately ended up outside. This, I believe, is connected to a second and arguably more decisive issue, which also relates to class, broadly defined. It is not something that would likely surface in an interview or an assembly speech, but rather something that became increasingly evident through long-term participation. I first began to understand it thanks to a conversation with Angie, an activist friend, after an assembly. While we were eating pizza, she remarked that the conflict was not just about what had been said in public forums. It was also about the fact that the Remadies workers were paid for their work. “They just come here, do their job, and leave,” she said, whereas the neighbors and volunteers at Àgora were there day after day, unpaid, doing what they saw as more meaningful and demanding labor. The perception was that members of the cooperative were profiting from the space and from the presence of drug-using womxn. On some level, it was believed they were maintaining those conditions rather than transforming them.

Over time, I heard these sentiments echoed repeatedly. Some neighbors pointed out that Remadies members only began to attend assemblies once the conflict had escalated. Before that, they had rarely participated in the space’s collective processes. Many noted that they did not live in the neighborhood. They were viewed as external professionals using Àgora as a worksite. They were also said to be funded by local, national, and international institutions. One of the most visible figures from the collective was often abroad, presenting their work in global forums. This person, it was said, would use Àgora to “take pictures” that looked good in grant reports and promotional materials. One particularly striking episode recounted to me involved an event hosted by Remadies in Àgora that included a catering service, where racialized participants were the ones serving food and drinks. The most radical critique I heard was that the cooperative, and particularly its leadership, were effectively profiting from the suffering of drug-using womxn. According to this view, they were not trying to interrupt the cycle of addiction but were instead invested in its continuation. And as has long been the case, some of these womxn died. Some neighbors suggested that the responsibility for this lay, at least in part, on the shoulders of those running the programs. I do not present these claims as

verified truths, but as expressions of everyday talk that I heard repeatedly in Àgora and in the surrounding neighborhood. What they point to is a deeper tension than what had been acknowledged so far: a class-based divide between marginalized, unpaid caretakers of the space, and salaried workers whose controversial methods, and perceived detachment, fed into broader suspicions.

It is not my role to judge, and in truth I would not know how to. What matters is that this conflict reflected a deeper divide between two models of care. One was voluntary, rooted in solidarity among people facing similar forms of marginalization. It operated without funding, outside institutions, and was understood as a form of mutual aid. The other was carried out by a cooperative made up of salaried professionals who, despite their good intentions and limited earnings, were not seen as part of that same struggle. These two approaches to care, one embedded in shared precariousness and the other shaped by formal employment and institutional logics, were ultimately incompatible within Àgora. In Raval, as in many marginalized neighborhoods, NGOs are powerful actors, and mutual aid activists often express strong skepticism toward them. I frequently heard the accusation that these organizations existed more to reproduce themselves than to address the political or material issues they claimed to confront. While some NGOs collaborated at times with political and mutual aid groups, the tension remained. The work of Àgora's unpaid commoners was understood as "solidarity, not charity," to borrow the well-known social movements slogan popularized by scholar activist Dean Spade (2020b). That ethic fundamentally clashed with more professionalized approaches to care, even when both sought to serve the same community.

#### **4.4 The Conflict with Fogons Rebels: Care Ideals vs. Street Reality**

The third and final case of a difficult relationship with external actors involved the collective Fogons Rebels. As mentioned earlier, they would come to Àgora every Monday to cook and distribute vegan dinners made from recovered food, open to anyone who wanted it. Their work was generally appreciated, as was the food. However, only one of their members, Sasha, was a *vecino*. He was originally from Latin America and regularly attended assemblies, both personally and on behalf of the group. Things ran relatively smoothly until Matías, another member who was widely perceived as something of a leader, began to irritate several of Àgora's caretakers. At first, the issue was his dog. While others followed the rule of keeping dogs on a leash to protect the plants and the space's fragile ecology, Matías repeatedly let his dog run loose, sometimes kicking a ball around for it to chase. This not only violated the rule

respected by others, but also damaged the plants that María and others had spent considerable time tending. When asked to follow the rule, he often ignored the request and responded provocatively, sometimes invoking his anarchist and animal-liberationist politics to justify the dog's freedom of movement.

Things escalated quickly. One Sunday, activists from Fogons Rebels arrived without prior notice, due to what they described as a misunderstanding, to retrieve a *paella* (a large cooking pan) they needed for another event. Their arrival woke up José, who was sleeping in Àgora at the time and reacted with irritation. Although generally calm, José could become volatile in certain situations, especially when in a bad mood. What began as a minor incident gradually turned into an escalating personal tension between José and Matías, marked by mutual provocations and a pattern of macho posturing. Within days, the conflict culminated in a particularly tense episode. According to multiple accounts, Matías attempted to initiate a physical confrontation, prompting José, backed by several *chavales*, to expel him from the space. In doing so, José made the classic hand gesture of a finger drawn across the throat, commonly interpreted as a death threat. Fogons Rebels regarded this as a red line. They claimed that one of their members had received a credible death threat and concluded that Àgora was no longer a safe space for them or their activity. They announced that they would not return unless José was permanently expelled. After some negotiation, we were able to organize a meeting between members of Fogons Rebels and Àgora's regular participants, though it had to take place in a different community space, as Fogons Rebels refused to enter Àgora again under the existing conditions.

This meeting was where things became particularly revealing and analytically important. I was there on the side of Àgora, as a *vecino*, with a personal aim of mediating as much as possible. I hoped that José could remain in the space, that peace could be restored, and that Fogons Rebels would return to cook in Àgora, something that had been both beautiful and deeply valuable for the neighborhood, especially for its most marginalized inhabitants. What unfolded in that meeting was, from my perspective, highly significant and, as often, difficult to assess in any definitive way. On one side was an anarchist, anti-speciesist collective composed mostly of young international activists. They argued that a space like Àgora, one that presents itself as feminist and aspires to build a different kind of society, should not accept the presence of violence or violent individuals. They insisted that someone who had made a death threat and continued to occupy the space on a daily basis should have been expelled immediately. Their

position was ethically coherent, politically grounded, and difficult to dispute. Yet the counterarguments offered by several of Àgora's neighbors made me pause and reflect.

Juan, María, and Nuria largely agreed on several key points. First, they argued that the one who initiated the conflict was Matías, although this was not the central issue. More significantly, they questioned whether Fogons Rebels truly understood the context. María laughed and dismissed the seriousness of the threat, exclaiming, "Come on, I see throat-slitting gestures every single day in this neighborhood. Where do you live?" The implication was clear: this was not an act to be taken literally, and certainly not by people unfamiliar with local codes. Once again, the underlying issue emerged. The activists from Fogons Rebels were not part of the neighborhood and did not understand its dynamics. They were younger, politically engaged people from other parts of Barcelona who carried out commendable ecological and social work in what they saw as a marginalized area, but without deeper involvement or relationships in the *barrio*. For instance, María recounted how Matías had once entered another nearby occupied space during a barbecue, wearing a mask, and whispered "murderers" to those cooking meat. Although Matías replied that this episode had nothing to do with Àgora, María insisted it mattered. For her, it was a provocation directed at local activists, including herself, and it showed a lack of basic relational care. The most compelling argument offered by Àgora's neighbors, at least from my perspective, was about the need for sensitivity in contexts of profound marginalization. People like José, who had experienced homelessness and who now lived in the garden, had been through significant hardship and trauma. In that context, it was perhaps not surprising that he might react aggressively if provoked. This was not to excuse the gesture, but to insist on situating it within the social and emotional landscape of the space. As they saw it, what was needed was not a rigid ethical code imposed from outside, but a form of collective care that could recognize and hold the contradictions of those already pushed to the margins.

Was Àgora's assembly, then, allowing violence? Not quite. People recognized that a serious conflict had occurred between two men and agreed that both bore responsibility. But there was a difference in how that conflict was interpreted. On one side stood the anarchist, vegan activists, who spoke clearly, invoked the principles of prefigurative politics, and argued that there could be no place in a feminist commons for someone who had issued a death threat. On paper, their argument was hard to dispute. On the other side were neighbors and activists embedded in the daily life of the *barrio*, who spoke the language of the place, understood its

dynamics, and refused the idea that a single rule could apply in all situations. They acknowledged that José had acted wrongly, but also knew that he was someone who cared for the space day after day, often silently and diligently. They were not willing to expel him over one moment of lost patience in response to a provocation from someone who only passed through once a week.

To me, this conflict exposed a powerful tension shaped by class background and everyday politics. On one side was an activist model that appeared politically coherent and morally unassailable. It combined free food distribution with anarchist, antispeciesist, and antimilitarist commitments, and expected the messiness of reality to adjust accordingly. On the other side was the lived reality of a complex neighborhood, full of unresolved trauma, structural violence, and contradictory forms of care. The residents and caretakers of Àgora did not claim to embody perfect ethics. What they practiced was not a pure or pristine ideal of care, but something far more difficult: staying present in the mess, living with contradiction, and refusing to abandon those who fail to live up to ideal standards. In that sense, they were choosing to stay with the trouble (Haraway, 2016), or rather the worry that has defined the very meaning of care since its earliest origins and that defines any politics of care worth the name.

## **5. Discussion & Conclusion**

This chapter examined how urban commons activists engage in practices of care toward those positioned as outsiders. The ethnographic material demonstrates that such care is far from a natural extension of political solidarity. Every gesture of welcome is entangled with difficult questions about boundaries: when they should be drawn, for whom, and on what basis. Once practices such as locking gates, calming conflicts, or distributing keys are understood as acts of care, it becomes clear that openness and safety are not opposing principles. Rather, they are co-produced and constantly negotiated. The boundary of each commons is not fixed, but contingent. It holds only because someone, each day, takes responsibility for sustaining it. As Nightingale (2019) argues, a commons “emerges from the exercise of power” and must be actively re-performed if it is to endure.

Taken together, l’Asilo and Àgora provide the kind of detailed threshold ethnography that Stavrides has called for. They illustrate how porosity is negotiated in everyday practice, bring to light contested criteria for exclusion (from fascists to salaried NGO staff), and position care

as the central moral language through which boundaries are managed. These cases also show how classed and gendered positions influence who can legitimately occupy the threshold. Polko (2025) observes that urban commons face familiar collective action dilemmas, such as free-riders who benefit without contributing and holdouts who obstruct group decisions, but leaves these figures largely abstract. The ethnography presented here gives them form. It examines how *ragazzoni* push for keys, how NGO workers are accused of exploiting the unpaid labor of neighbors, and how the conflicts these situations generate are resolved not through rational incentive structures, but through a shared moral economy in which care, rather than efficiency or equity, becomes the primary basis of judgment.

Each attempt to redraw boundaries brought forward intersecting dilemmas that theoretical frameworks rarely resolve. At l'Asilo, university-educated artists grappled with how to include *ragazzoni* from the hooligan milieu without reinforcing sexist hostility. Allowing these men to remain often meant that women and queer activists felt displaced. Yet removing them risked being perceived as classist. Àgora encountered a parallel tension when Remadies brought drug-using womxn into the space. Mothers worried about syringes near the children's play area, while the cooperative framed any attempt at exclusion as a betrayal of feminist and harm-reduction principles. Assemblies returned repeatedly to the same unresolved question: whose oppression takes precedence? The ethnographic record echoes Lagalisie's (2018) critique of what she calls "oppression arithmetic," which breaks down as soon as lived bodies and social contexts replace abstract categories. Rather than ranking harms, many activists adopted a situated ethic of care: observe harm as it occurs, intervene to reduce it, open the space again under slightly revised conditions, and return to the issue as needed.

Corridor skirmishes and gate debates are micro-expressions of larger forces. Precarious housing, touristification that prices out neighbors, and policing that criminalizes street poverty all converge on the commons threshold. When hostel beds fill with weekend visitors, l'Asilo becomes a shelter of last resort. When patrols sweep Plaça del MACBA, Àgora inherits the displaced bodies and the tension that travels with them. Care is never merely interpersonal; it wrestles with city-wide violence that no assembly alone can undo. In Young's Marx-inflected account, such violence serves domination and oppression (1990), a reminder that the quarrels outside the gate are never just personal disputes.

How that care was exercised depended on what counted as legitimacy inside each commons. L'Asilo relied on cultural capital: five-hour assemblies, streamed debates and carefully minuted sub-tables embodied the idea that deliberation could heal inequality. Legitimacy flowed to those who spoke standard Italian, quoted feminist theory and could afford late-night attendance. In stark contrast, Àgora's decisive currency was what *vecinos* called *calle*, a street credibility accumulated through visible labor, greeting newcomers in Arabic, watering plants, or standing firm when a knife appeared. María or Yennifer could eject an aggressor with a calm *sin violencia* (without violence) because they had earned respect in dozens of unnoticed interactions. Formal consensus loomed smaller. Relational authority did the work. Porosity took shape through these different repertoires, neither inherently superior. L'Asilo's deliberative style slowed expulsions to near paralysis yet eventually found a way to interact pedagogically with *ragazzini* and to coexist, at a distance, with *ragazzoni*. Àgora's pragmatic style delivered faster conflict resolution but risked masking power imbalances if a respected neighbor happened to be wrong. The comparative lesson is clear: sustainable porosity has no universal recipe. It depends on context-specific repertoires.

Both commons drew lines that could harm. Àgora's neighbors, organizing from the ground up, parted ways first with an institutionally funded cooperative, then with a visiting anarchist collective when trust eroded. They also took decisive action against recurring aggressors, while keeping the gate open for the drunken migrant who needed a mat or the trans sex worker pausing for a cigarette. In contrast, l'Asilo found exclusion far more difficult. Class privilege bred hesitation: evicting someone with fewer resources often felt like a betrayal of political values. Activists instead raised funds for youth educators, created a separate rehearsal entrance for the *ragazzoni*, and openly acknowledged their own limitations. As middle-class activists, they lacked the training and confidence to manage direct confrontations in the street. Partial inclusion, however clumsy, was seen as preferable to symbolic purity. Safe space aspirations often clash with pragmatic constraints. A hall that welcomes as many neighbors as possible becomes less predictable and, at times, less safe. Care, in this context, cannot be equated with security. It entails a readiness to remain engaged amid discomfort. As Lagalis (2018, p. 345) reminds us, intersectionality cannot be reduced to additive categories; no fixed calculus can determine who will harm or support others in a given situation.

From a street-level perspective, l'Asilo and Àgora can be understood as alternative infrastructures (Alam & Houston, 2020). They provide spaces through which those excluded

from formal institutions access material, affective, and political support. Their boundaries are not fixed through pre-established rules but are continually negotiated through situated practices. While some exclusion criteria are explicit, such as the rejection of sexism or fascism, others arise in the moment: a sexist comment overheard during an event, or an undocumented man arriving quietly at dusk. These situations highlight that democratic care must not only acknowledge structural marginality but also enable marginalized urban actors to co-shape adaptable infrastructures for sustaining life (Gutierrez Sanchez, 2023; Power, 2019). Tronto reminds us that care includes protection from violence (1993, p. 104), at the same time in which caring across difference requires openness toward those who remain unassimilated Young (1986).

In this light, boundaries should be understood not as neutral lines but as sites of care labor. The ethnographic material from l'Asilo and Àgora shows that sustaining porosity involves friction. These tensions serve a purpose: they prevent openness from collapsing into either closure or indifference. As Stavrides notes, porosity must be actively produced. Nightingale (2019) likewise reminds us that commons are not neutral containers but must be continually re-performed through unequal relations of power. What allows commons to persist is not the absence of conflict but a willingness to engage with it directly. Rather than seeking comfort or purity, activists at both sites committed to staying with the worry. In the next chapter, the conclusion, I conceptualize the practices described here as boundary care infrastructure, and integrate them into the broader typology of care infrastructures developed throughout the thesis.

## Conclusion

Caring is more than an affective-ethical state: it involves material engagement in labors to sustain interdependent worlds where the meanings of caring are not straightforward. [...] A feminist inspired vision of caring cannot be grounded in the longing for a smooth harmonious world, but in vital ethico-affective everyday practical doings that engage with the inescapable troubles of interdependent existences.

Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2012, pp. 198–199)

### 1 Synthesizing the Argument: A Typology of Care Infrastructures

This section synthesizes the thesis' core findings through the lens of care infrastructures, developing the main conceptual argument. This dissertation has shed light on how care is enacted, negotiated, and politicized in two urban commons (l'Asilo and Àgora) by tracing how activists perform, name, and contest care across different gendered, cultural, and classed terrains. The chapters demonstrated that care is not a stable category but a dynamic and uneven field of meaning and practice. To integrate these insights, I present here a typology of social infrastructures of care that captures the multiple ways in which care becomes embedded, constrained, or reimagined in commons. While care infrastructures can be made of material artefacts or more-than-human relations, and physical and social infrastructures mutually shape one another (Power & Mee, 2020), here I focus specifically on (human) social infrastructures. This typology of care social infrastructures, summarized below, constitutes a conceptual contribution that emerges from and responds to the ethnographic materials developed throughout the thesis. As the table shows, each site represents a different configuration of care, with distinct strengths and limits.

| Type of Social Infrastructure             | Definition                                                                                                                                              | l'Asilo                                                                                                                    | Àgora                                                                                                           |
|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Discursive Care Infrastructure</b>     | Shared language, narratives, and ethical framings that define care as a political value. Includes slogans, collective ideals, and vocabularies of care. | <b>Very High:</b> "L'Asilo is care." Care framed as foundational political value. Crisis of care thematized in assemblies. | <b>Low:</b> Care rarely named or discussed explicitly. No shared discourse or politicized language around care. |
| <b>Organizational Care Infrastructure</b> | Tools and protocols that make care visible, shareable, and structured. Includes facilitation,                                                           | <b>Medium–High:</b> Facilitation trainings, care surveys, care-related proposals. Tools exist but uptake is in process,    | <b>Low:</b> No written protocols or rotating roles. Care emerges from informal norms and committed presence.    |

| Type of Social Infrastructure       | Definition                                                                                                    | l'Asilo                                                                                                                                              | Àgora                                                                                                                                                                 |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|                                     | surveys, calendars, and role rotations.                                                                       | inconsistent and gendered.                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                       |
| <b>Embodied Care Infrastructure</b> | Informal, habitual, and affective practices through which care is enacted materially and emotionally.         | <b>Medium–Low:</b> these practices are present, but uneven, gendered and often a point of contention. Not the most valued and recognized activities. | <b>Very High:</b> Daily tasks like cleaning, cooking, gardening, conflict mediation central and routinized. Gendered, classed, and racialized, but highly recognized. |
| <b>Boundary Care Infrastructure</b> | Practices, routines, and judgments through which communities negotiate thresholds of inclusion and exclusion. | <b>High:</b> Extensive deliberation over “hooligans,” exclusion thresholds, red lines. Conflict between care and safety openly debated.              | <b>High:</b> Informal trust-based exclusions. Strong gatekeeping culture based on presence and behavior, not discourse.                                               |

The politics of care in urban commons movements cannot be reduced to a single metric of presence or absence. Care emerges through multiple, intersecting layers of practice and meaning that can be conceptualized as social infrastructures of care. This typology distinguishes four analytically distinct dimensions through which care is both stabilized and contested in commoning practices: structural, embodied, discursive, and boundary care infrastructures. This framework enables a shift beyond simplistic binaries (formal/informal, structured/spontaneous) toward a more detailed and relational understanding of how care operates in urban commons. Each type of infrastructure reflects a specific mechanism through which care becomes politically salient: shared meaning-making, explicit governance and conflict-resolution processes, everyday bodily labor, or negotiated porosity. These infrastructures frequently overlap and interact. Yet, drawing them apart analytically provides a clearer lens to examine how commons both sustain and struggle with care over time, across spaces, and amid social differences.

*Discursive care infrastructure* refers to the shared narratives, ethical framings, and political languages that shape how care is understood and valued. It includes slogans, internal vocabularies, explicit framings, as well as conflicts and debates, about care. This infrastructure gives care symbolic weight: it enables activists to articulate care as a political ideal and to reflect on its contradictions. At l'Asilo, discursive care infrastructure is highly developed and consistently mobilized. Activists regularly invoke *cura* as a foundational principle. Phrases such as “l'Asilo is care,” “we care for the process,” and “caring is what keeps the commons

alive” circulate in assemblies, chat groups, and public statements. This discursive infrastructure enabled activists to recognize a “crisis of care” during moments of burnout and conflict and to propose structured responses such as feminist facilitation. In other words, it was the elaboration of care as discourse that made infrastructuring efforts possible in the first place. Yet this symbolic richness can also become a liability: care may be moralized, overused rhetorically, or performatively invoked without being materially supported. At Àgora, by contrast, care is rarely articulated. There is no shared discourse around “care” as a concept or political value. This absence of discursive infrastructure does not indicate a lack of care, on the contrary. It reflects a context in which care is not reflexively politicized. As shown in previous chapters, the lack of shared tools for redistribution or critical reflection can produce a gendered and uneven distribution of care labor, highlighting the limits of embodied care in the absence of discursive recognition.

*Organized care infrastructure* refers to intentional, structured mechanisms designed to distribute care responsibilities, formalize expectations, and create continuity across time and participants. It includes tools such as facilitation protocols, calendars, rotating care roles, and conflict mediation frameworks. These infrastructures reflect a conscious governance effort to make care visible and shareable, while preventing its concentration in specific individuals or groups. At l’Asilo, such mechanisms are present and expanding, though implementation remains uneven. Several tools and practices were developed during the crisis period: the “Obtorto Collo” COVID protocol, the participatory care survey, feminist facilitation training, netiquette guidelines for digital platforms, and proposals for emotionally supportive care spaces. However, as discussed in Chapter 5, these tools are often precariously embedded. They are typically initiated by a small number of individuals, inconsistently adopted, or lacking follow-through. Facilitation, for instance, is encouraged but not consistently rotated. Care remains a shared responsibility in principle more than in practice. In this sense, l’Asilo’s care infrastructuring is intentional but partial. Structured mechanisms exist, yet often rely on ad hoc implementation and gendered voluntarism. At Àgora, by contrast, organized care infrastructure is minimal in formal terms. There barely any written protocol, care roles are not orderly rotated, and deliberative procedures are often improvised. Still, it would be inaccurate to describe the space as unstructured. Certain informal routines such as the *permanencias* schedule, the event calendar, and the habitual organization of cleaning, opening, and hosting contribute to a degree of stability. These routines are not typically codified or explicitly discussed but are anchored in trust, repetition, and everyday presence. Àgora thus operates through an embodied

informalism that stabilizes care without institutionalization. This mode, however, remains fragile. It depends heavily on the commitment of a few individuals and is especially vulnerable to burnout.

*Embodied care infrastructure* focuses on everyday, material enactments of care: cleaning, feeding, conflict mediation, gardening, welcoming newcomers, maintaining safety, and managing tensions. Unlike formal protocols, these practices often occur without being recognized as political or even named as “care.” Yet they are essential to the ongoing reproduction of the commons. Feminist scholars have long argued that care must be understood as labor, and that commons (as much as all life) rely on it. This labor is embodied, affective, and often invisibilized, particularly when performed by women or marginalized groups. At Àgora, care is tangible and routine. It is performed daily by those who open and close the space, prepare communal meals, de-escalate conflicts, water plants, clean toilets, and sustain interpersonal relations. While these acts are rarely thematized as “care,” they constitute the affective backbone of the commons. This infrastructure is not formally structured, but is deeply embedded in bodies, gestures, habits, and neighborhood ties. It is grounded in commitment, proximity, and familiarity, with little reliance on discourse or deliberation. Moreover, care here confers legitimacy. Those who care more are often recognized as legitimate decision-makers, as exemplified by María’s informal leadership. This sharply contrasts with l’Asilo, where decision-making legitimacy is more closely tied to discursive power. Embodied care plays a far less central role in sustaining the commons. While some activists engage in cleaning, hosting, or logistical work, these tasks, similar to Àgora, tend to be gendered and unevenly distributed. Yet at l’Asilo, care is more often discussed than enacted. A disconnect arises: the infrastructure for debating care is more developed than the infrastructure for performing it. As a result, burnout, exhaustion, and moralized accusations about who “cares enough” have become recurring tensions.

*Boundary Care Infrastructure* refers to the social and ethical routines through which commons negotiate inclusion, exclusion, safety, and porosity. This negotiation is itself political care work, since redrawing the threshold each day keeps the space simultaneously welcoming and safe. Class position quietly shapes every gatekeeping gesture: who guards the door, and whose comfort is prioritized, is never neutral. These are the tacit or explicit mechanisms by which collectives decide who is “inside,” who is “out,” and under what conditions. They include practices of trust-building, gate-keeping, inclusion protocols, moderation efforts, and collective

judgements about behavior. At l'Asilo, boundary care infrastructures are discursively elaborated and ethically fraught, unfolding across a pronounced class divide between university-educated cultural activists and neighborhood *ragazzini/ragazzoni* from the urban sub-proletariat. The notion of avoiding "proprietary uses" of the commons co-exists with digital netiquette, mailing-list suspensions, and complex assembly dynamics. Debate often hinges on whether exclusion would be "a classic example of classist behavior," so activists test pedagogical fixes, such as hiring local youth educators, adding late-night cleaning shifts, refusing to hand over keys, to protect womxn from harassment without summoning the police. Boundary labor here equals care: every compromise balances feminist red lines with an aversion to class-based expulsion. At Àgora, boundaries are enacted more directly. Because the core caretakers share the barrio's precarity, their *mucha calle* creates an immediate language of recognition with neighbors. Trust and presence, rather than written rules, determine access; legitimacy flows through daily tasks: opening gates, watering plants, escorting those behaving aggressively out with a calm "sin violencia." Tension flares when higher-educated outsiders arrive: Remadies' salaried harm-reduction staff are criticized for "making a profit" and ignoring *dinámicas do barrio*, while Fogons Rebels' vegan cooks are implicitly accused of not being able to conciliate idealistic anarchism and non-violence with the traumatic lived realities of the neighborhood. Here, boundary care defends a fragile zone of mutual aid for the poorest by drawing a line against actors whose institutional or cultural capital outstrips their embodied commitment.

This fourfold typology of care infrastructures reframes radical care politics in urban commons movements as a terrain of infrastructural tensions and socio-material contradictions. The cases of l'Asilo and Àgora do not represent linear models or teleological progressions, they demonstrate instead that distinct infrastructures enable and constrain care in specific ways: urban commons movements capacity to sustain care depends on the complex interplay of embodiment, deliberation, organization, and boundary-drawing. L'Asilo's care politics is deliberative, discursively elaborated, and increasingly structured, but not always embodied or equitably distributed. Care is something to be talked about, proposed, and refined. Its legitimacy derives from political language and process, but its materiality is often neglected, and class differences with neighborhood residents complicates every attempt at inclusion. Àgora's care politics is embodied, affective, and tacit. Its care is performed, not discussed. Its legitimacy emerges through doing, not saying, shared class experiences bridge activists and neighbors. But the absence of structural or discursive support leaves it vulnerable to exhaustion,

inequality, and opaque authority. Across both sites, iterative boundary work (unlocking and locking gates, circulating keys, and de-escalating disputes) co-produces porosity and safety by continually renegotiating who may cross the threshold and under which conditions. It shows that keeping a space porous is itself a form of caring labor, one that protects the fragile conditions that let other forms of care persist.

Seen through this four-part lens, radical care politics emerge as a field of practical challenges: how to align speech with labor, how to balance spontaneity and continuity, how to welcome without becoming depleted, or to feel safe without resorting to surveillance. By emphasizing the interplay of infrastructures rather than relying on a single evaluative metric, this thesis provides a grounded and multilayered framework for radical care politics in urban commons movements.

## **2 Contributions**

This thesis makes a number of significant contributions to the social sciences. First, it reasserts the explanatory value of long-term, theory-building ethnography rooted in participant observation for the relational and processual study of social movement processes. Seventeen months of daily immersion at l'Asilo and Àgora generated layered fieldnotes that track subtle shifts in routines, practices, and tensions, in a way that would have been impossible in shorter research timelines or interview-centered designs. In addition, militant ethnography with participatory methods such as survey co-design, collaborative video, and collective gardening, produced not only data but also political insight and relational accountability without compromising analytical sophistication and critique, given it was practised with reflexivity and transparency. Ethnographic approaches based on long-term participant observation are thus not only fruitful, but actually essential, in order to understand the complex and contradictory social movements processes.

The dissertation also contributes, more directly, to social movement studies: first, by introducing urban commons movements as a distinct political process, capturing urban commons and social movements dynamics in an integrated way, rather than in isolation, and showing the everyday ways in which they operate as hybrid infrastructures of both reproduction and mobilization. In doing so, it contemporarily contributes to critical commons studies. Second, it shows in detail the process by which political keywords are generated, travel, and

get transformed and contested within social movements. The analysis of cura shows that diffusion might occur through the perceived absence of the very concept that is discursively invoked: activists expose and critique systemic failures, gendered dynamics, and internal conflicts, invoking care as something missing or betrayed, thereby simultaneously generating political traction and internal friction. This dual status reflects the challenge of translating shared values and political concepts into sustainable political forms: at l'Asilo, care did not acquire centrality because its meaning was shared, but because it was repeatedly questioned. Its prominence signalled a desire to articulate radical alternatives to possessive individualism, while also exposing the fragility of political ideals in the face of polycrises, related burnout, as well as classed and gender dynamics.

To make sense of these tensions, the thesis develops the concept of *deliberative care infrastructuring*, which refers to the precarious and never-ended collective effort to formalize care through processes such as feminist facilitation, participatory surveys, and netiquette practices. Contrasted with *prefigurative spontaneity*, as I termed l'Asilo's political common sense, this concept helps explain how activists try to balance the emancipatory feeling of the lack of strict rules with the need for continuity and coordination, and how structured responses to care dilemmas are ultimately compatible with anti-hierarchical principles: flexible forms of organization can support radical commitments, provided they remain anchored in political reflexivity rather than bureaucratic logic. This relates to a broader notion of Hegemony of Non-Hegemony developed by the Neapolitan commons movement, the seemingly paradoxical principle that allows urban commons activists to keep together unity and diversity (see Velotti et al., 2025).

This thesis also contributes to renewed lenses with which to analyze the role of class in social movements. While class is often treated in demographic or economic terms, I show how it shapes different internal movement repertoires, decision-making mechanisms, and ultimately different social infrastructures of care. Care understood as both value and values captures the way in which care sustains the commons in material and symbolic ways that are intimately entangled. As we argued in a parallel work (Velotti & Cigna, 2024), care values are most likely held by women, subjects with a migrant background, people engaged in some left-wing activist organizing, as well as working in interpersonal jobs; what we called the *caring classes*. The latter are not only providers of devalued labor, but also carriers of ethical orientations that sustain collective life. Comparative ethnography reveals the stark contrast between l'Asilo's

discursive care infrastructure and Àgora's embodied task-based approach grounded in shared precarity, as well as different boundary infrastructures in marginalized neighbors: this distinction enriches debates on movements' class composition and expands how political subjectivities are analyzed in movement contexts.

Finally, the thesis develops the typology of care infrastructures presented above, which shall be useful to interpret how commons movements politicize care through concrete practices. This four-fold framework distinguishes discursive, organizational, embodied, and boundary care infrastructures, allowing for a relational diagnosis of how care is and becomes politicized in different ways. The framework is not a definitive one but helps to make visible the frictions that characterize any collective attempt to sustain care across differences. In doing so, the thesis contributes not only to studies of social movements but also to feminist political theory, science and technology studies, and commons scholarship. Fundamentally, by arguing that grassroots political life is less shaped by ideological coherence or formal blueprints than by the situated labor of keeping fragile collectivities intact, which is by no means less political.

### **3 Significance and Implications**

This dissertation is part ongoing debates of how political alternatives are built, cared for and maintained at the grassroots in times of polycrisis. It explores how care, as both a value and value-producing activity, and ultimately as a political principle, is practically produced, while also looking at what it produces and how. Simultaneously, the analysis draws attention to both urban commons movements' diversity and their common fragility, conflictuality, and resilience. The effort to politicize care appears as shaped by different forms of inequalities and recurring tensions between open-ended spontaneity vs. the need for continuity, openness vs. clear boundaries, elaborate articulation vs. embodied practicality; dynamics that are especially visible in urban contexts marked by long-standing marginality and neglect, where commoning must simultaneously sustain internal trust and resist external pressures.

For scholars working on social movements, this thesis proposes a shift in emphasis. It shows how political values do not only live in discourse or ideology, but are embedded in and shaped by everyday practices and politics. Assembly debates, shared calendars, facilitation routines, keys circulation, informal exclusions, and cleaning shifts are part of the essential layers of infrastructure that constitute the essence of how care is interpreted, enacted, and, ultimately,

politicized, always carrying an ethico-political weight within them. The typology of care infrastructures developed here provides a vocabulary to make these dynamics intelligible without collapsing them into neat oppositions, like formal and informal or success and failure.

Feminist and critical commons research has long emphasized care, or social reproduction, as the essential labor for commoning. What this thesis offers is a way to articulate that labor without romanticizing it: care is understood as neither only a sentiment or disposition, nor just a kind of labour, but as an ethos of collective action and infrastructural process that are to articulated, organized, and embodied, through negotiations, conflicts, contradictions. This perspective brings renewed attention to class in collective action, understanding it not just in a material sense but as something that is also performed in everyday practices of recognition, legitimacy, or embodied authority.

Activists and practitioners working in commons and mutual aid do not need theoretical validation to know what sustains emancipatory collective projects, yet this research may help them explain why certain practices can bring people closer, or rather keep them at a distance. Urban commons do not thrive because everyone agrees; they endure when responsibility to care is assumed, either silently or through explicit deliberation and conflict. That work might involve noticing fatigue, stepping into support roles, or holding open a space for others to speak or stay, in acts that are rarely named, but translate in who and how many burn out, or feel valued and decides to remain involved over time. Ultimately, these supposedly micro-political factors are just as fundamental as are grand theories in the broader business of transforming society in emancipatory way. That is, what progressive social movements attempt to do.

Still, the limitations of this study are clear: the argument does not apply to all commons, nor to all movements. I do not aim to produce a universal theory; instead, what this thesis offers is a situated, empirical way to think about care both as an infrastructure and as a point of ethical friction. By paying attention to these tensions, the thesis joins wider debates about how collectives hold together.

#### **4 Future Research**

This thesis does not make generalizable claims but does make claims that are open to be transferred: the findings of this study can be tested, contested, or broadened in other sites and

moments in future studies. On a first level, research in rural commons movements could complement this research, given that density, proximity and collective memory could influence how care is understood, debated, practiced, embodied. The weight given to physical presence that featured so prominently in the case studies of l'Asilo and Àgora is likely to work very differently in land-based initiatives. Furthermore, the thesis focuses on marginalized neighborhood at the core of two Global North cities, but other contexts could unveil very different dynamics, particularly in spaces of the global periphery, shaped by colonial legacies and global hierarchies. Attending to the colonality of care, the hierarchies it reproduces or resists, and the languages through which it is justified, could enrich this framework in ways that go to the heart of how care becomes political. More generally, it would be interesting to analyze what care does to all kinds of other social movements—other than commons ones—and what they do with it.

There is also further work to be done from a methodological point of view. Ethnography, especially when combined with participatory practices, brought this research close to its sites, enabling slow observation, proximity, and a kind of intimacy that other methods might not capture. However, its findings are, by design, not easily generalizable. Future research might explore how to combine ethnographic depth with other, more quantitative and generalizable tools, to assess the actual spread of care across different geographies, movements, and moments. One of such methods could be time-use surveys, to assess how different kinds of care work are actually distributed within movement organizations and/or urban commons. Taking time from a more long-term perspective, it is perhaps the very elephant in the room: is care here to stay? Is it more of a temporary frame, or will it characterize the times to come in a considerable way, as a fundamental political concept? This cannot be predicted, but a more longitudinal study on how care in urban commons movements evolved in a decade would be fascinating: in l'Asilo, for example, during the COVID-19 crisis activists explicitly addressed care and started to implement processes around it, but whether these efforts led to lasting changes remains uncertain. Conducting a similar study in several years might reveal what stayed in place, what not, or whether different forms of care emerged or were politicized: care infrastructures shall be followed across time, especially as the conditions surrounding them shift.

Lastly, for this thesis I chose not to center non-human actors and artifacts. In other words, I do not center inanimate or more-than-human infrastructures, but social ones, despite the fact that

commons like l'Asilo and Àgora are not only social; they involve materials, technologies, animals, plants, and so on. The decision to set them aside was pragmatic, but it also narrowed the scope, so future research might return to these more-than-human entanglements to ask more questions and investigate to what extent the politicization of care can be observed and analyzed beyond social infrastructures, but in their interaction with all kinds of infrastructures.

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