Paths toward the Same Form of Collective Action: Direct Social Action in Times of Crisis in Italy[1,2]

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Heterogeneous collective actors often select the same form of action, but there is no academic investigation into how and when this happens. This article does so focusing on direct social action, that is, a form of collective action that does not primarily focus upon claiming something from the state but instead focuses upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society. Building on conceptual categories developed by social movements' scholars (context, organization, and identity) and relying on rich qualitative and quantitative data from collective actors in Italy in a time of crisis, this article identifies four paths toward direct social actions (DSA): the *social* path, the *political-social* path, the *social-political* path, and the *political* path. In doing so, our analysis shifts from the search for causal factors to the reconstruction of the dynamic, patterned sequences of events by which collective actors progress in adopting a certain form of action. The implications of these findings extend beyond studies of DSA in times of crisis in Italy, to an analysis of collective action in general. Capturing these multiple paths also has important implications for understanding how the same form of action is differently implemented and received when it is adopted by different actors.

Introduction

What do a voluntary organization involved in the distribution of food for those in need, a social center interested in solidarity with migrants, an agro-ecological farming organization, and a political party involved in support work around natural disasters have in common? Most conventional social science explanations would suggest very little. While these four collective actors occupy different social spheres, have different goals and ideologies, and hail from different backgrounds, in times of crisis in Italy each of them is using, together with other forms of action, what we call direct social actions (hereafter, DSA).

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DSAs are forms of "action that do not primarily focus upon claiming something from the state or other power holders—this might be seen in revolutionary or reformist terms—but that instead focuses upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself" (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, p. 369). The concept of DSA groups together different practices, such as solidarity actions, political consumerism, alternative finance, housing occupations, self-management, free legal advice, medical services, educational courses in languages and arts, and so on. These practices are different from one another but they are used for some common purposes: to change society rather than the state and to effect change directly rather than effecting change through the expression of claims directed at the state or other institutions.

In recent years, DSAs have been investigated by different sectors of social research: third sector (Milbourne 2013), solidarity economy (Barkin 2012), economic activism (Forno and Graziano 2014), tactics of alternative resilience (Castells et al. 2012), prefigurative politics, specifically in the anarchist and post-autonomous tradition (Holloway 2002), youth participation (Yates 2015), environmentalism (Schlosberg and Coles 2016), basismo in Latin America (Rossi 2017), political life styles (Dobernig and Stagl 2015), commons (De Angelis 2017), social innovation (Mulgan 2007), and the radical right (Froio and Gattinara 2016). However, this rich and diverse literature has not reconstructed the multiple pathways through which collective actors, from heterogeneous social spheres, goals, identities, ideologies, resources targets, and historical backgrounds choose to adopt DSAs. Moreover, the vast literature on collective action makes broad assertions regarding how actors adopt certain forms of action, by either studying a single actor or making generalizations across a single sector. In so doing, the literature portrays a single pathway by which collective actors come to select the same form of action. In reality, the picture is much more complex.

This article is premised on the idea that there is more than one way through which different actors adopt the same form of action, and these various pathways have important implications for understanding how forms of action are differently implemented and received. In doing so, our analysis shifts from causal factors to paths—that is, the steps or causal chains—with the goal of answering the following research question: how and when do different collective actors adopt the same form of action? Responding to this research question is a fundamental step if we want to develop a dynamic, gradual, and procedural approach to the study of how the forms of collective action are selected, implemented, and received. This analytical move is informed by process tracing, which entails moving backwards from the event under investigation (in our case, the adoption of DSAs) and reconstructing a historical understanding of strategy making and performing.

Collective actors using DSAs in times of crisis in Italy is a compelling empirical case through which to examine the general research question. Italy is not merely going through a deep economic crisis but a multiplicity of crises, which have roots dating back to the early seventies and which profoundly accelerated due to the economic situation of 2008 and beyond. Yes, there is the economic crisis,

with increased unemployment, a larger percentage of the population at risk of poverty and social exclusion, and a sharp decline in the average salary, but this is flanked by a social and political crisis. The dimensions of the social (social disintegration) and political (depoliticization)[3] crisis have deepened during the years of the economic crisis (2008 onwards) but were not born in the economic crisis. Rather they are rooted in the conflicts of a post-industrial society and the radical change in the relations between capital and labor on a world scale (Touraine 2010). For this reason, we believe that it is more accurate to speak of the economic, social, and political multidimensionality of the concept of "crisis" (Zamponi and Bosi 2016).

From Causal Factors To Paths

In choosing which form of action to adopt, collective actors often draw from a pre-existing menu of options, built by the cultural, social, and political capital accumulated through a process of critical learning in previous struggles. This menu of forms of action, which Charles Tilly has identified as a "repertoire of collective action" (Tilly 1978), maintains a general stability, but it is in continuous and slow development. So if it is correct to say that collective actors do not reinvent the wheel during every cycle of mobilization, it is also true to say that collective actors do not all adopt the same wheel and that the same type of wheel can be used across different paths. While the first option, similar collective actors who choose different forms of action, has been investigated in the literature (Carmin and Balser 2002; Adams and Shriver 2016), the second option, different paths through which heterogeneous collective actors adopt the same form of action, has not received scientific attention to date.

We believe that this absence of scientific investigation is motivated by the fact that scholars of collective action have generally preferred to search for the most powerful predictor of *why* collective actors adopt certain forms of action at a moment in time, rather than investigate a diachronic process of "what follows what", tracing the history of *how* and *when* a certain form of action is strategically adopted.[4] When the adoption of a certain form of action is taken, whether this occurs before, during, or after a certain period, and how an actor arrives to that choice clearly affects the explanatory value of this choice. Indeed, a processual approach reconstructs how and when the choice of the form of action emerges gradually and diachronically, from the interaction among actors when they are faced with strategic dilemmas, rather than from a mere behavioral response to the causal factors, which instead limits the rich dynamic and open-ended nature of socio-political complexity. In other words, our intention is to move away from an "average-based" approach to an approach stressing multiple paths. Causality is conceived not as a relationship between dependent and independent variables, but as a property of the dynamics that they generate. The goal is to reconstruct the steps of a sequence and how these steps connect to each other giving life to a path, which is to explain the process. The choice of the form of action is therefore not simply the product of a process, but a part of

it, and at the same time has an impact on the process dynamics in terms of its implementation and reception.

Building on the work of James Jasper (2015), we assume that the selection of forms of action is strategic in the broadest sense. Strategy is explicable by context, emotions, identity, culture, core beliefs, and background as well as cognitive reasoning about interests. In this sense strategy is understood as part of a process through which actors define how the social world works and how they can position themselves in comparison and interaction with other actors. Therefore, to understand actors' strategic action, their genealogy needs to be traced through paths that are temporally sequenced and contextualized. By not considering the role of strategic choice, the existing literature considers all collective actors as influenced by internal and/or external factors in the same way. That is, the focus of these studies is to merely identify correlations between independent variables and outcomes instead of explaining the choice of the form of action and its implementation and reception. However, in reality, a moderate and a radical actor, for example, can see and interpret the context in a different way; they can make different choices about the same form of action, they can implement their choices differently, also conditioned by how the other actors, be they internal or external to the movement, interpret the implementation of the chosen forms of action (Bosi and Davis 2017).

A processual approach does not ignore the importance of factors, but moves beyond statistical correlations allowing us to "peer into the box of causality to locate the intermediate factors lying between some structural cause and its purported effect" (Gerring 2007, p. 45). What it suggests is that no factor has an explanatory capacity in itself, but rather it is when we look at the interaction of multiple factors in their temporal sequencing that we are able to point at different paths toward the same form of action. Drawing on social movement studies we argue that collective actors differ significantly in their adoption of the same form of action according to a mix of pragmatic calculations (*resources and organization*) (McCarthy and Zald 1977; Morris 1984; Staggenborg 1988) and moral imperatives (*previous experiences, identities, and ideologies*) (Melucci 1989; Jasper 1997), which change in relation to the *context* (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; Kriesi et al. 1995).[5] Different actors choose the forms of action that they believe are most effective and/or legitimate in a given context, but, as their believes shift due to internal and external changes, they reinterpret which forms of action they adopt. Thus, organizational structure mainly models the views of collective actors on what actions they deem most effective, while identity tends to establish the guidelines that actors use to assess the legitimacy of particular forms of action. Although each factor is generally associated with a specific interpretive domain, this does not preclude the possibility that a factor can influence an alternative domain. The interpretations deriving from these factors establish informal guidelines, creating parameters on which collective actors draw to determine which forms of actions are, and are not, legitimate and are more likely to be effective in achieving their goals.

Forms of collective action are never entirely neutral, but are connected with specific types of organizations and identities. Forms of collective action and

Table 1. Paths toward DSAs in Italy in Times of Crisis

		Collective actor (organization and identity)	
		Social (DSA as constitutive primary action)	**Political (political claim-making as constitutive primary action)**
Context	Using DSA before the crisis	Social path	Political-social path
	Starting to use DSA during the crisis and as a response to it	Social-political path	Political path

their implementation express actors' goals and, in turn, shape how beneficiaries receive them. Beneficiaries perceive whether an actor is legitimate in adopting a certain form of action by contextualizing the same form of action within the actors' historical pathway. In this way, a certain form of action appears to be more feasible if adopted by an actor rather than by others, in particular when it is perceived to be at the center of an actor's action from the beginning of its own history.[6] As Kathleen Blee suggests "activists groups quickly take a character that defines them into the future" (Blee 2012, p. 25). If actors are certainly bounded in their selection of which forms of action they adopt, it is also true that beneficiaries are similarly bounded in reading which actors are more legitimate in adopting which forms.

Building on our empirical fieldwork and using the conceptual categories developed by social movements scholars (context, organization, and identity), we have identified four different paths through which collective actors in Italy use DSAs during the period of crisis. These paths are distinguished by factors involving the context and factors related to the collective actors (organization and identity), both in relation to each other and in relation with DSAs (Table 1). On the one hand, when referring to the characteristics of the actors, we distinguish between originally social actors, that is, actors who make DSAs the center of their action from the beginning of their own history, and originally political actors, that is, actors who make political claims the center of their action. For the former, the use of DSAs is a primary constitutive element of one's identity; for the latter, it is a form of action instrumentally chosen to reinforce one's political claims. On the other hand, when referring to the interpretation of the context of actors, we distinguish between those who have chosen to use DSAs in a previous historical phase and those that choose to adopt it within the present context of crisis and in response to it, as the crisis represents, in their interpretation, a change of context. We find four distinct paths toward DSAs: we label them *social*, *political-social*, *social-political,* and *political*.[7]

This typology is built on the idea that different paths emerge based on the interaction between actors (analyzed both in their identity-related and

organization-related traits) and context. The crisis, from this point of view, is a change in the context in which actors make their strategic choices. It does not determine the emergence of new forms of action: rather, it favors the possibility that certain forms of action find a constituency. DSAs are structurally part of the repertoire of contention (Bosi and Zamponi 2015), and actors, in the Italian context, have been offering them for a long time. The crisis, with the combination between economic hardship, welfare retrenchment, social disintegration, and declining trust in institutions, favors an increase in the demand of these forms of action and opens spaces for the strategic choice to implement them by actors who interpret the present context as a context of crisis.

Before moving to the data collection and then to the analysis, we want to make clear that we are not suggesting that these paths are linear and predictable, nor that there are distinctive boundaries between these paths. Indeed, these boundaries are clearly porous. Steering away from an "average-based" approach does not mean that this work will not develop explanations that can be applied to other contexts. Our aim is ultimately to show that multiple pathways exist through which actors choose to adopt the same form of action.

Data Collection

This research began abductively (Tavory and Timmermans 2013) by observing how DSAs were differently implemented and received in the Italian context given the different paths actors were pursuing. In our case, the surprising phenomenon was that variation existed in the paths toward DSAs. The observation of such phenomena was the impetus to gather data, using a research strategy that involved plural methods: action organization analysis, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and participant observation.

Through action organization analysis (Kousis et al. 2018), we have mapped over 3000 collective actors involved in DSA, across the whole of Italy. This was possible by identifying and then using general and thematic hubs that provided us with the websites of the collective actors involved in DSAs. Subsequently, we coded the content of the websites of a random sample of 500 of these collective actors, active between 2007 and 2016 (see Appendix A). The codebook consisted of six groups of variables: site, organization, practices, aims, frame, and values.

Most of the data used are the result of in-depth interviews conducted, between March 2016 and February 2018, with 53 "representatives" of 39 actors that use DSAs. These actors were selected via a representative approach based on a reflection of reality, political and geographical differentiation, and saturation.

Where in most cases the collective actors to be interviewed were identified directly by the authors, in other cases they were proposed by the respondents themselves (snowball strategy) (see Appendix B). On average, the duration of each interview was about 90 minutes. Instead of forcing interviewees into predefined categories using closed questions, we gave them the chance to produce their own narratives. At the outset of each interview, the nature and purpose of the study were explained and respondents were given the opportunity to

ask questions about the research. We proceeded using a general thematic track and on more specific topics, so as to accumulate useful knowledge on the following aspects: mission and ideals, initiatives and projects, choice in the forms of action, organization and networks, effect of the crisis, and consequences. Furthermore, the interviews were supplemented with documentary, archival, and print sources and with participant observation in assemblies, events, and several of the activities conducted by collective actors.

In the analysis of the fieldwork material, we have focused on context-centered and actor-centered factors (resources, organizations, previous experiences, identities and ideologies) and observed that similarities and differences in the development of paths that actors followed tended to be strongly associated with the interaction of actor-centered and context-centered factors in the choice to adopt DSA. The four different paths that we are going to present in the next section have been in fact re-constructed through an iterative process of inductive analysis of empirical data from the fieldwork material as well as theory-oriented, deductive thinking based on existing conceptual categories developed by social movement scholars.

Paths to Direct Social Action in Italy in Times of Crisis

Social Path

The collective actors that follow the social path are involved in secular and religious voluntary work focused on the care of people who are poor, disabled, or socially marginalized and in the organization of social and cultural activities and solidarity-economy initiatives. These actors run soup kitchens and food banks, solidarity-economy initiatives (from solidarity-based purchasing groups to self-managed mutual funds), time banks, social cooperatives, work and consumer cooperatives, cultural clubs and youth centers, civic associations and neighborhood committees, services provided by associations and trade unions, in short, the vast world of the Italian nonprofit sector. For these actors, the choice to adopt DSAs is the constitutive element of their action. It is the logical continuation of a moral imperative rather than an instrumental calculation based on some change in the context. A representative of a religious actor, involved in the distribution of food for those in need in the city of Padova, told us their mission is “to be at the service of the poor” (Cucine Popolari, Padova). In Italy, these actors have a history and roots that stretch long before the present context of crisis. They have always focused in absolute terms on the social value of the DSA itself, on its ability to have a direct impact on reality, to respond immediately to a need as well to promote values of solidarity and social utility, delegating political advocacy to other actors. This does not mean that these actors have a homogenous history. On the contrary, they come from different cultural traditions. A large proportion of them belong to religious communities. The Catholic Church provides services and addresses poverty

in Italy through big organizations like Caritas or Banco Alimentare, but also through a galaxy of parishes and voluntary groups that must not be overlooked. Other important actors are the three confederations that represent the mainstay of the Italian trade union movement (CGIL, CISL and UIL), which have in their DNA the mutual aid activities in support for the working class' rights and benefits. Furthermore, there are other secular actors motivated by moral values, such as in the case of the organization emergency, or other heirs of a tradition of cultural and civic commitment that, although not claim-based, were informed by a certain political belonging, as in the case of ARCI, the network of cultural clubs once connected to the Communist Party. Finally, there is the history of solidarity-economy initiatives that are rooted in the environmental awakening of the 1980s and 1990s and in the Global Justice Movement of the early 2000s, when a wide set of self-organized mutual funds, fair-trade groups, solidarity-based purchasing groups, and solidarity-economy cooperatives were born.

While these actors are not really influenced by the context of crisis in their selection of DSAs, as they were using DSAs before it, they appear to have been somewhat affected by the crisis. In recent years, economic deprivation has increased the need for certain services and austerity-driven welfare retrenchment has pushed these actors beyond their previous limits in offering help. This is the case for Emergency, an NGO traditionally engaged in providing healthcare in war-ridden contexts. In the last few years, Emergency opened a series of medical centers in some areas of Italy. Before the crisis, these organizations saw mostly migrants and the poor. However, during the crisis a broader range of Italians, particularly those who had lost their jobs or were unable to access basic welfare support, began approaching these actors (Cucine Popolari, Padova and Emergency, Napoli). These actors have contributed significantly to protecting individuals in times of crisis. This has been possible because their moral imperative toward DSAs and historical use of these forms legitimize them, in the eyes of beneficiaries, as actors that are noninstrumental and not interested in broader goals.

However, economic hardship significantly decreases the private and public resources available for solidarity initiatives, making many of the most professional actors, within the social path, struggle to keep up with the increasing demand.

In such a situation of crisis, these actors rethink their role, sometimes developing more political identities, while remaining primarily and constitutively oriented toward DSAs. Our respondents reported that they are careful not to become a substitute for the welfare state. This is what a representative of Emergency, from Napoli, told us:

> What we do should be done by the public sector. (**...**) An important part of the work is to monitor emerging issues, to respond but also to bring them to the competent offices so that the public sector can take care of them. It's a difficult job, it involves time but the hope is that the public sector will eventually take care of it.

Political-Social Path

Those actors that we insert in the political-social path are mostly some of the social movement organizations belonging to the radical left (in particular some of those that come from the post-autonomous tradition): squats, occupied and self-managed social centers, as well as political collectives and grassroots trade unions (i.e., COBAS, USB). Although primarily oriented toward political claims, these actors have instrumentally chosen to adopt DSAs as a significant complement to their activities and had adopted these strategies before the crisis. The exhaustion of the protest-based Global Justice Movement, for example, triggered for these groups a reflection on the lack of efficacy of political protest alone. This brought about a focus on local, community-based, material struggles and initiatives (Teatro Polivalente Occupato, Bologna). In this path, prefigurative politics, based on the Zapatista model, plays a very significant role: the idea is to accompany political claim-making with concrete alternatives, rooted in the local community. "Think globally, act locally" emerged in the context of decline of nation-states and arose from the need to create locally rooted and globally networked alternatives to neoliberalism. This is clear for example in the case of La Strada, a social center in Rome, which was also heavily influenced from the Zapatistas' experience:

> We started to work on how we could continue to be an important social garrison for the area, which therefore did not only do all the work of the social center (gathering young people, political discussion, participation in political campaigns and all this stuff here) but then in that space the theme of welfare from below was concretized … … La Strada was born a few months after the Zapatista uprising, and the elaboration on Zapatism, on the topic of insurgent communities, on what was produced at the level of re-elaboration of the thought of the historical left, in Chiapas, was decisive in this area.

The great transformation for these actors, whose antecedents were using DSAs in the seventies, is the decision to overcome the traditional barriers of self-isolation that had characterized autonomous spaces during the eighties and nineties. Given the exhaustion of the cycle of protest, these actors instrumentally began to introduce DSAs into their action repertoire, putting themselves forward as "new intermediate bodies" (Action, Roma) between society and institutions, capable of producing political socialization and representing different groups within the community.

The actors we have placed within the political-social path say that they were not surprised by the crisis. Instead they say that they were mature enough to read it and oppose it, as they have been always in opposition to the capitalist system. A representative of AQ16, a social center in Reggio Emilia, very clearly described what the crisis is for these actors:

> For us, the crisis is not the result of a particular historical conjuncture that took place from one day to the next. We think that the crisis is due to the capitalist system and we place ourselves against the capitalist system. So when we thought

> about the crisis, it made no difference to what we did every day, that is, to think about how to attack capitalism to create an alternative to the capitalist system itself. ... In addition to the economic crisis we have seen that there is a crisis of sociability. We, in the face of this, try to open shared and common spaces, of sociality in short. We try to combine the political and the social in this way here.

Given their previous rejection of the capitalist system, they read the crisis as a confirmation of their previous pragmatic calculation to adopt DSAs as a significant part of their activities. The outbreak of the crisis has further legitimized the choice to adopt DSAs and seems to have produced advantages for these actors in terms of increased audience and ability to relate with other actors outside their closest networks. A representative of Rete Diritti in Casa, a group involved in housing squats in Parma, speaking about the crisis says:

> We predicted the arrival of the crisis. We confronted the crisis with a tool in hand [DSA]... ... We had already experimented [with DSA] ... and therefore we did not find ourselves facing the problems others face. The idea that an increase in crisis means an increase in struggle has not manifested. More crisis has meant disintegration of the left, both the institutional and the movement one. Those who survive, survive because they have chosen to intervene in the social sphere.

While these actors play an important role in their local communities in terms of social services they provide to the communities they come into contact with, they do not see themselves as pacifiers of a social conflict. As the representative of Rete Diritti in Casa suggests:

> We are recognized for having intervened in the conflict. Even though replacing public services helps bring social peace, we are still seen as actors that create socio-political conflict within the city ... ... The alternative welfare that we create is a welfare of struggle. All the people in the occupations pursue a path of struggle. The practice of self-management within the occupations creates mutual aid but it is difficult to sustain.

Social-Political Path

For those actors we include in the social-political path, the choice of DSAs takes place in a context of prolonged crisis, and under the heavy influence of the experiences of other Southern European countries, in particular Greece and Spain. This is a nonhomogeneous category of actors, using mutualistic practices, such as clinics and popular schools, canteens for mutual aid, markets without intermediaries, cooperatives, recuperated factories, recovery of urban spaces, social innovation, and self-management. These actors share the idea that the age of politics as we knew it is over, and that a new politicization may take place only as a consequence of a radical choice in favor of DSAs. The Greek example has been particularly influential in drawing activists that were previously engaged in anti-austerity protest toward the formation of new collectives, based on the idea of direct service provision as a response to the crisis. Among activists that

belonged to movement groups, unions, parties, and various organizations, there is a widespread feeling that the crisis has disintegrated the social basis of political action, and that there is a need to regenerate, re-focus on DSAs and, on the basis on DSAs, form new collectives and begin a new process of politicization.

They make DSAs the primary element of their action not so much in reference to a moral or an instrumental choice than as a way to respond to concrete needs of everyday life and to create alternative modes of production based on sustainability, self-management, and equal access during a period of crisis. As suggested by a representative of the GRUP-PA, a group in Bologna interested in the role and tactics of social movements for the promotion of health rights:

> We have moved from a critique of globalization to the re-appropriation of our lives and the crisis has in some way focused us on the practical, material aspects of life, which either you take responsibility for or no-one does. So you resolve material needs as there are no other options. Material needs exploded in the crisis.

Those actors that we include in the social-political path respond to the increase in unmet material needs in the period of crisis not through ideological approaches, though present, but through a strategic pragmatism based on inclusiveness, reciprocity, and horizontality. For these actors, first there are DSAs that respond to concrete material needs and then, around them, the theoretical and political dimensions are explored. As an activist of the cultural club Sparwasser in Rome told us:

> Welfare is the main mutualistic practice we want to create. At the beginning we didn't know how to define ourselves, and still, after a year of activity, we do not have a complete answer. So we said "we build our identity by what we do".

Precisely because of their focus on practices rather than on their theoretical and political analysis and agenda, the actors of the social-political path do not explicitly refer to a specific political ideology and not all of them declare their political affiliations. These actors start from concrete needs and are able to create fluid identities that are not necessarily closed within a political line. At the same time, they aim to construct social bonds, develop moments of cooperation and mutuality, build community and a sense of belonging, trust and social well-being, contribute to reconstructing collective claims through the active participation of citizens and the promotion of coherent relationships of solidarity. The actors of the social-political path are seen as constructors of relationships in a period of crisis and of austerity policies, where social disintegration creates intense social isolation and individualism. According to this analysis, political actors, including the movements they have belonged to, have lost their social roots, and DSAs are necessary to reconstruct the pre-political solidarity that is a precondition for political participation, as spokesperson of the Je so' Pazzo social center in Napoli told us:

> We came from a history that was based on a level of politicization that in Italy had been completely lost. This made us realise that we had to start from scratch, from social tissue instead of doing political struggles over opinion, because it was clear that on that level there was a detachment between the common people and those who were supposed to represent them. [...] On this, Greece opened our eyes. [...] We learned that [SYRIZA] emerged not only from a high level of political mobilization [...], but also from a whole network of actors that practiced mutualism, that were able to reconnect and to provide an immediate response to the concrete problems of the people, and to immediately construct a hope of redemption, not only immediate help, through a political subject that was the direct emanation of that experience.

These actors aim to break with previous recent mobilization campaigns and look at the experience of the emerging labor movement at the end of the 19th century as a successful example. Through the DSAs, they build themselves as subjects. The same actors are recognized primarily for the practices they put in place instead of for their political positions. This allows them to very easily build relationships with other actors and also with local institutions, in innovative processes of politicization of the social. For these actors, in fact, DSAs are not ends in themselves, but are aimed at building renewed sociality and participation capable of generating social and political struggle.

> We talk about practices as “welfare from below” when they are transformative. Instead, sometimes, you only replace public services, which is the main problem of the medical clinics: you do the surgery, but are you doing only volunteer work or are you doing politics? Are you helping public services by augmenting them so that people experience less contradictions, or do you use it as a way to intervene in the social fabric by bringing about conflict? What we always say is that our goal is to close the services we provide. We would like our fight to result in health care in Campania working and for there to be no need for the clinic. On the banner that we hung in the entrance it is written: "We do not do charity, we create community". (Presidio Salute Popolare, Napoli)

The cooperative or mutual part of collective action tends to grow during the crisis period compared to the claiming and conflictual part. But at the same time, these practices do not exclude conflict. On the contrary, from time to time, actors adopt a conflict tactically, as part of a pragmatic agenda, rather than as an end in itself or as an ideological position. For the representative of Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, a group involved in housing squats in Rome, the question whether the provision of resources mitigated against the recognition of political contradictions was explained:

> Several times in our discussions, the fear of becoming social shock absorbers emerged. When you make an anti-eviction picket or when a person is thrown on the street and you take her into your occupation, it is true that she follows a struggle-based path, but it is also true that we solve a problem with the administration. It is a question that we must always keep an eye on. [...] Every time a new occupation takes place the occupiers say: “Now we are going to

> make a new occupation and put at risk our current occupation". [...] In this case, you go beyond solving an immediate problem and produce new conflict.

Political Path

The political path is characterized by the strategic choice to use DSAs as a form of action, although in a secondary position to political claim-making, and by the fact that this choice took place in the context of the crisis and as a consequence of it. These actors are mainly political parties: the few political parties that, in response to the explosion of the crisis, decided to use DSAs as an instrument to answer their declining capacity to organize and represent the people. As we will see in the comparative section, this is the path that involves the smallest amount of actors and that is least effective, although its cultural influence in spreading certain ideas and practices should not be overlooked.

The idea of a DSA-oriented component of the activities of political parties is not new in Italy: it has deep roots in the history of the Italian workers' and democratic movement, beginning in the first mutualistic and cooperative practices at the end of the 19th century and declining only after the development of a state-based welfare system after the First World War. Furthermore, the mass political parties that structured Italian politics from the mid-1940s to the 1990s, especially the Christian Democracy and the Communist Party, were strongly rooted in local subcultural networks, in which party predominance relied on a wide set of mutual societies, cooperatives, unions, and cultural organizations. The involvement of political parties in DSAs began declining with the crisis of mass parties in the 1980s and 1990s, but came back later, in a much more limited fashion, in the context of the economic crisis.

The first Italian political party to propose DSA as a way to address the crisis was the small radical left party Rifondazione Comunista (PRC). In 2008 it was, for the first time, not able to enter the parliament so launched the so-called "social party" strategy and gave birth to such projects as the People's Purchasing Groups and the Active Solidarity Brigades. More recently, in 2017, another small leftist party, Sinistra Italiana (SI), launched a public competition for DSA-based projects that would be financed with a part of the salaries of the party's MPs. These parties approach DSAs with an instrumental logic, to strengthen the parties' presence among the disadvantaged sectors of society, regain credibility and legitimacy in the public sphere, and create networks of relationships with other social and political actors. As a PRC activist told us:

> I think that the left needs to get back that credibility, but to do so it needs to go back to being an instrument. [...] I think that politics has lost credibility. [...] The concrete challenge now is to go back to doing politics for what Politics with a capital P is, that is a concrete instrument to improve material conditions. A concrete instrument for the transformation of society. A concrete instrument of credibility.

Nevertheless, DSA is meant also to address the social disintegration that hinders any attempt of political action. These actors believe that, if they provide

the people with the organizational and cultural tools to resist the crisis, they will create the solidarity-based social tissue that would, in turn, favor a comeback of progressive political participation.

Some radical right actors, such as the party Fratelli d'Italia and the neo-fascist groups Forza Nuova, Fiamma Tricolore, CasaPound Italia also implement DSAs, with distributions of food to poor Italian families, the occupation of abandoned buildings in response to the housing emergency, and so on (Castelli Gattinara and Froio 2016). The difference, in these cases, in comparison with the radical left actors is in the nativist discrimination they apply to beneficiaries and in the absence of a perspective of self-organized activation of beneficiaries.[8] As suggested from a representative of Casaggì, a right-wing youth group associated with Fratelli d'Italia in Firenze, DSAs have been selected as a way to reconstruct social legitimization, particularly necessary for those who carry the stigma of neo-fascism and have long been ghettoized.

> With the crisis, the right had the opportunity to get out of a hole in which it had been relegated for so many years. The crisis has paradoxically offered the possibility, thanks to the change of the political scenario and the tempering of some attitudes, for some elements of the right to leave the ghetto and participate in the activity of the neighborhood. Before the crisis this would have been seen as contentious. So practices of social militancy were used as strategies for escaping from the ghetto.

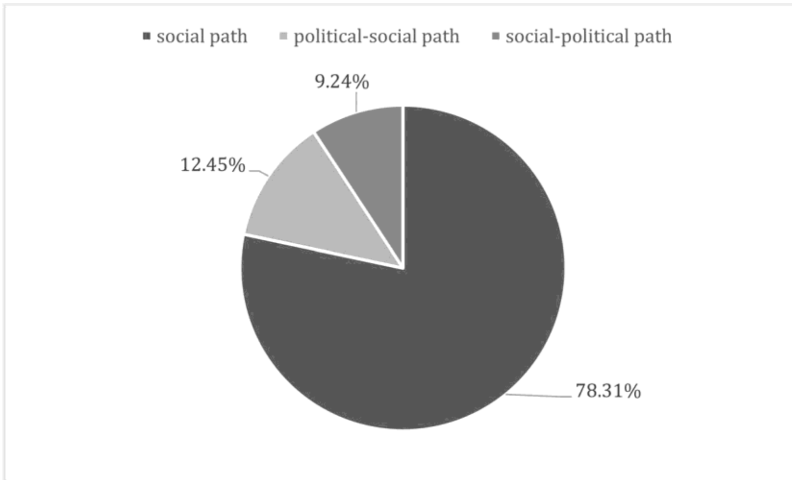
In general, as we will see in the comparative section, the groups that follow the political path are rather small and ephemeral. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the use of DSAs is one of the few grounds on which these parties have been able to exit from their isolation, establish fruitful political relationships, and renew practices and ideas in the last few years, as a PRC activist explains well:

> I would never have thought to spend a week talking to anarchists, and they would never have thought to have such a relationship with communists. After this experience you have a way to approach classic politics that is completely different. [...] The Active Solidarity Brigades taught me how to work in political collectives that are composed by different political cultures, they have educated me to listen, to synthesise everything and everyone around a material pragmatism.

Comparison of Paths Toward DSA

In this section, we add the data gathered through the alternative organization analysis (see Appendix A) to compare the paths, the conceptualization of which we based on the empirical fieldwork. The purpose of this comparison is, on the one hand, to point out that there is no single "turn to practice" in times of crisis, but there are multiple paths that actors follow toward DSAs, and, on the other hand, to show that these paths matter in the choice of both the goals for which DSAs are used and the other forms of action used by actors. Based

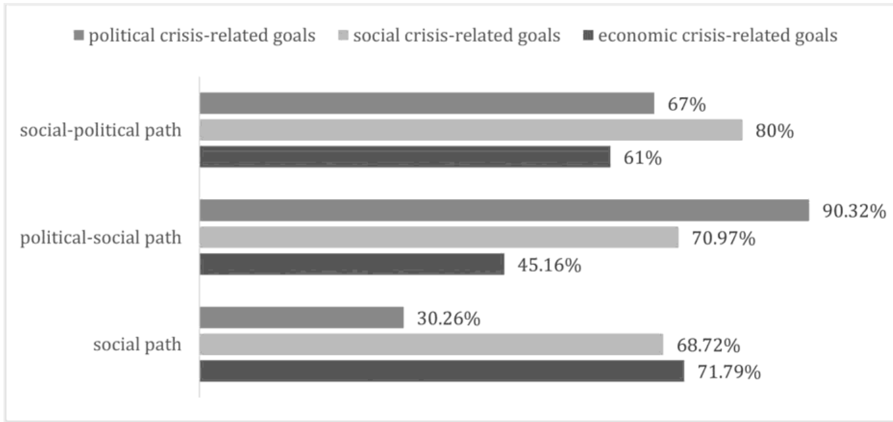
Figure 1. Percentage of actors following each path



on the action organization analysis of a random sample of 500 actors that use DSAs in Italy in times of crisis, we can say that the vast majority (almost 80 percent) of these actors follow the social path. Most DSAs are carried out by actors that have always been doing it, even before the recent crisis. The second largest group is composed of those that follow the political-social path, and had been using DSAs as a complement to their political-claim based action before the crisis. Actors that follow the social-political path amount for 9 percent of the sample, while those that follow the political path are so few that they do not even show up in our quantitative sample (figure 1). On the one hand, this data tells us not to fall into the trap of the rhetoric of newness that often characterizes the discourse around DSAs (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) or to think that DSAs are mainly used by movement-related actors: Italian civil society has been using these forms of action, both as a constitutive and primary element of their activity (social path) and as a complement to their political-claim based action (political-social path) for a long time, and they continue doing so in the context of the crisis. On the other hand, the DSA-based actors that were born during the crisis (social-political path) show some distinct peculiarities, denoting that the crisis has been triggering significant innovation in this field, other than, as we have shown in the previous section, affecting all paths.

Actors following different paths tend to address different dimensions of the crisis in their action. For example, figure 2 shows how actors following the social path use DSAs mainly to pursue goals that are related to the economic crisis, while actors following the political-social path use them primarily to address the political dimension of the crisis and actors that follow the social-political path evenly address goals that are related to the political, economic, and social dimensions of the crisis, being the ones that focus the most on the latter. This picture is coherent with the outcome of our analysis of interviews: the focus on

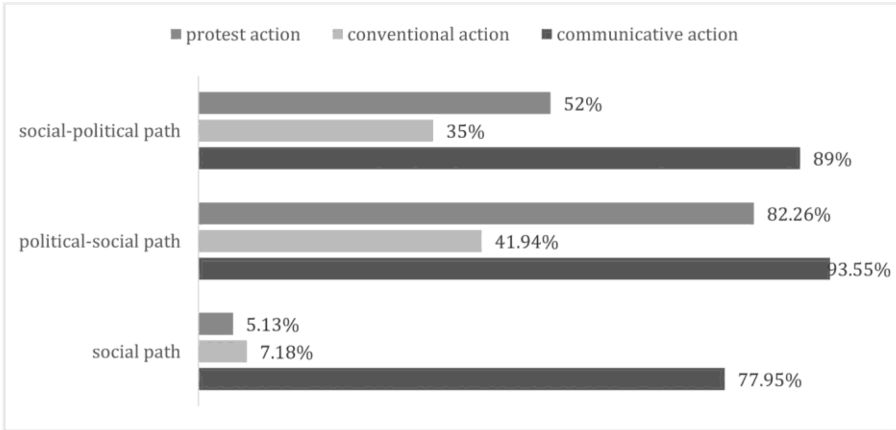
Figure 2. Type of goals pursued by actors across paths



the crisis is shared by all actors, but they interpret it differently and use DSAs to address different dimensions of it.

In comparison with those who follow the social path, for whom the choice to adopt DSAs was not triggered by the crisis but rather forms a constitutive element of their action and a logical continuation of a moral imperative, actors that follow the political-social path consider DSA as an instrument to strengthen their political claim-based activities, and see the crisis as a chance to add DSA to the repertoire of action (that for years have been their distinctive trait). For them, increasing demands for services, due to the economic crisis, present an opportunity to grow their activities and to increase legitimacy for their primary action. A similar instrumental attitude toward DSA is shown by actors that follow the political path, although they started using these forms of action only after the start of the crisis. Their main interest lies in the political dimensions of the crisis: the crisis of representation and participation that weakened their institutional strength. Thus, they see in DSA a tool to use to address this crisis. They interpret the social dimension of the crisis in relation to the political: there is the need, from their point of view, to reconstruct social ties of solidarity among people in communities, because these constitute a pre-political prerequisite to political participation. Nevertheless, their late arrival into a rather crowded field, and their lack of strength and credibility make their role far less visible than others. The actors that follow the social-political path share an interest in political claim-based action with the actors that follow the political-social and political path, but, differently from them, they chose DSA as the primary element of their action. The reason for this choice is in their more radical reading of the social crisis: as other actors, they consider neoliberalism-generated social disintegration as a threat to political participation. However, they take this interpretation much more seriously than actors that follow the political-social and political path, and choose to focus more on goals related to the social and economic dimensions of the crisis.

Figure 3. Non-DSA forms of action used by actors across paths



They think that social disintegration weakens the possibility for political participation and thus choose to focus primarily on the reconstruction of relations of social solidarity among people and communities, through DSA. For them, there is no point in carrying on with the usual political-claim-related business, and DSA is not to be used as a complement to political claim-based action, but, instead, has to be chosen as the primary action on which to reconstruct a new politics. For them, the choice of DSA is more radical than for others, because the choice was recent (different from the case of the social path) and it is not a supplement to other forms of action (as in the case of the political-social and political path) but a primary identity-defining choice. Actors that follow this path tend to downplay their previous individual or collective political identity, and to shape a new one, much less ideologically charged and based on DSA. Nevertheless, this does not mean that they have a depoliticized notion of their action. On the contrary, if we take a look at the use of non-DSA forms of action (figure 3), we see that actors that follow the social-political path tend to protest, although not as much as those that follow the political-social path. The difference is in the process: actors that follow the social-political process downplay pre-existing political identities and forge new ones, shaping them on DSA, with the goal of lowering the barriers to access the collectives and to create a wider collective involving people that would not have joined political organizations. Actors that follow the political-social and political paths use DSA to reach wider constituencies, but keep their own political collectives and identities. From the point of view of actors that follow the social-political path, the current crisis is a phase of latency of political claim-based political participation, the phase in which, according to Alberto Melucci, "movement areas create new cultural codes and enable individuals to put them into practice" (Melucci 1989, p. 60). As noted by an activist of Làbas, a social center in Bologna:

> We prefer that there are movements. [...] It is not as if there won't be anything ever again. But in this moment we are in a phase of non-movement. However,

> you have to find other forms of struggle. The fact that there is no movement does not mean that there are no struggles. So how do you do it? [...] Where is it written that, if you call yourself a movement, then you will be in charge of that movement when it emerges? It isn't written anywhere. If you are not ready to renew yourself, to get out of your identity, to be free from certain rhetorical languages, you will not be part of the movements that will come.

Although this article is not meant to focus at the cross-national diffusion of the forms of actions, we believe it is important to underline here how different paths toward DSAs were differently influenced from: direct relational ties, in the case of the political-social and social-political paths, and from nonrelational channels, in the case of the political path (McAdam and Rucht 1993). Our respondents that we have included in the social-political path have stressed during the interviews two ways through which the cross-national diffusion worked with other contentious actors from Southern Europe through direct relational ties. For those we have inserted in the political-social path, there is a very similar type of diffusion, but this happened earlier, in the 1990s, and especially with South American countries. Instead, media and social networks have been extremely important in the cross-national diffusion of DSAs for those collective actors that we have included in the political path.

Furthermore, the analysis of interviews pointed out significant differences in the implementations of DSAs by actors that follow different paths. Actors that follow the social-political path, for example, are rather different from those that follow the social path in their attitude toward beneficiaries. They treat beneficiaries in a less hierarchical way and aim to involve them in a process of emancipation meant to produce political subjectivity, other than providing them only the service in itself. At the same time those which follow a social-political path are also different from those that we insert in the political-social path in that the activists tend to share the economic needs of the beneficiaries and they attempt to address them through DSAs.

Finally, there are also significant differences in how DSAs implemented by different actors are received: actors that have DSAs as their primary type of activity, such as those that follow the social and social-political paths, tend to achieve higher levels of positive response from beneficiaries as they have more credibility in relationships with others and they are less conditioned by long-lasting militant traditions. Instead, those actors that we have included in the political and political-social paths are associated with previous forms of actions that were exclusively focused on political-claim making, so they are less credible among beneficiaries, because the use of DSA is perceived by many as instrumental and because political claims can be an obstacle for beneficiaries who are looking only for the direct satisfaction of immediate needs, with no string attached. The logic behind DSA is strongly influenced by the process of individualization that we have been experiencing over the last 40 years, and specifically during the recent crisis. It is possible to reposition individuals in the collective sphere through a pragmatic participation that allows individuals to freely and creatively build new collectivities without having to subordinate

the aspirations and personal interests in the name of solidarity with certain social groups. So having a strong political identity makes it more difficult for collective actors to be seen as appropriate vehicles for those who initially want to merely participate in a pragmatic way. At the moment, long-lasting militant traditions are seen as potential obstacles for individuals that might be interested in DSAs without sharing its political tradition. Collective actors with lower-intensity collective identities are perceived as legitimate actors implementing DSA in times of crisis. What we observe then is that beneficiaries of DSAs are deeply aware of the political background of the actors who carry them out, and this has a significant impact on the efficacy of actions themselves. We also need to bear in mind that the use of DSAs changes the structures of relations of actors, and this is particularly visible in the case of the political-social and social-political paths, in which actors are able to establish networks of relationships with organizations and institutions that are rather different from those they had in their previous political experiences. In terms of degree, those which follow the social-political path, being shaped much more on DSAs than on an ideological or political-claim based ground, are better able to establish relations with other actors and local institutions, in innovative processes of politicizations, which are not instrumentally intended, but discovered by doing.

Conclusions

This article has pursued two main goals. First, on the empirical level, it has systematically examined the paths of those actors that use DSAs in Italy in times of crisis, challenging simplistic views on the "turn to practice" of collective action in times of crisis, rooting instead the transition to DSAs in paths that involve different actors in different ways and that depend on multiple factors (context, organization, and identity). Second, analytically, it has identified variation among actors that use the same form of action, proposing a processual approach to explain the historical understanding of strategy making and action.

What empirically emerges are four distinct paths that collective actors in Italy followed in their use of DSAs. The crisis in Italy has made more popular and widespread the use of DSAs, even for those collective actors who previously did not use them. This does not mean that the crisis itself determines the transition from one form of collective action to another. This depends on the interpretation of the context by the collective actors and their organizational and identity characteristics. It does not imply that DSAs are new forms of action that appeared with the crisis, nor that the collective actors, in times of crisis, are engaged only in DSAs, as we have seen, this form of action is often accompanied by others, such as conventional ones and protest-based ones. Although this article mainly focuses at how the adoption of DSAs is interpreted in different ways from actors that follow different paths, it is also important to stress that some common dynamics seem to characterize the DSA in our empirical case: re-materialization, re-territorialization, and re-positioning of the individual into the collectivity (Bosi and Zamponi 2019). First, while during the crisis

needs have exploded, DSAs seem to answer to these in a concrete, direct, and immediate manner. During times of crisis, a widespread sense of urgency and a corresponding need for concreteness emerge, pushing to re-materialize collective action. Secondly, in the processes of individualization and precariousness, further triggered by the crisis, individuals have lost a good part of collective memberships (religion, class, political sub-culture, etc.). In response to that today the re-territorialization of collective action customizes neighborhood ties, reciprocity, and solidarity in the local area. Finally, DSAs seem to be perceived to provide new opportunities for repositioning the individual in the collective sphere. In fact, they are able to activate from below, through the re-materialization of collective action, the promotion of useful social activities that are the prelude not so much of the adhesion to a particular political line, but rather of the development of new social ties at the territorial level, repositioning the individual in the collective sphere. DSAs do this by enhancing the individual emancipatory dimension through a pragmatic participation, which allows to freely and creatively build new collective aggregations without having to subordinate the aspirations and personal interests in the name of solidarity with certain social groups. In fact, DSAs do not aim to mitigate the negative effects of the crisis in a reactive manner, but are proposed proactively to guide citizens toward socially useful collective activities, reactivating in individuals the desire to be agents themselves of their own destiny as part of a community.

We believe that the implications of this study extend far beyond our empirical case. Previous research highlights the importance of internal and external factors. This research confirms the importance of these factors but enhances our understanding of how context, organization, and identity work in combination with one another and how they work within the broader selection of form of action process. The same context affects different actors differently, given their organizational structure and identity. But context changes as well across time, and this variation has a direct impact on how and when different actors strategically decide to adopt one form of action. With this article, we have not only claimed that collective actors are heterogeneous, but we have also shown that they often follow multiple paths to the same form of action. An average-based approach distorts our understanding of the integrative, conjunctural, and varied process toward one form of action. For this reason, we have proposed a processual approach that is dynamic, gradual, and procedural. Capturing these different paths not only creates new knowledge about how and when collective actors adopt the same form of action; it is also an imperative for generating theoretically sound explanations of how the same form of action is implemented and recognized differently from multiple actors.

Notes

1. We would like to thank the interviewees for their willingness to participate in our research. Also we would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. Marco Giugni, Maria Kousis, Suzanne Staggenborg

and Katrin Uba provided useful comments on this work at various stages. Cara Brough has courteously helped with the language.

2. Results presented in this article have been obtained within the project "Living with Hard Times: How Citizens React to Economic Crises and Their Social and Political Consequences" (LIVEWHAT). This project was funded by the European Commission under the 7th Framework Programme (grant agreement no. 613237).
3. The concept of depoliticization refers to a context in which decision-making processes tend to lose their political nature and to be increasingly moved to an indirect governing relationship (Burnham 2001; Flinders and Buller 2006).
4. Social movements research has constantly focused on why forms of actions are selected (Taylor and Van Dyke 2004; Doherty and Hayes 2019). This research has found a number of internal and external factors to the collective actors. Internal factors include: material and symbolic resources, the characteristics of the organization, collective identity, the goals and the messages that collective actors want to communicate. External factors include: political opportunities, media coverage, and targets.
5. Throughout the article we will refer to "organization" also to include resources and the material and structural elements that enable collective action, while referring to "identity" we also include previous experiences, ideologies, and the symbolic and cultural elements of collective actors.
6. We fully agree with Duyvendak and Fillieule that "a strategic approach runds the risk of exclusively focusing on the interaction itself: a kind of "hodicentrism," a fascination with the hic et nunc, the synchronic, whereas we think that a strategic perspective should take the historical dimension, the diachronic, into account as well" (Duyvendak and Fillieule 2015, p. 308).
7. These labels are not based on the analytical distinctions on which Table 1 is structured, but on the dynamics we have observed in the development of paths.
8. A similar project ("5 Star Microcredit") was launched by populist web-based "5 Star Movement": 5 Star MPs give a share of their salary to a fund for small businesses promoted by the Ministry for Economic Development. It is not, technically, DSA, being managed through the mediation of state institutions and being more based on the idea of giving back to the citizens MPs' salaries, that are considered too high. Nevertheless, this initiative testifies how widespread the idea of directly helping specific sectors of society in times of crisis is.

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