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Recasting Solidarity during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Case Study

The practices of social movements during the pandemic show how the severe limitations on political and social organization have been turned into opportunities by increasing the focus on social justice and rethinking human security. This case study explores how the anti-military occupation movement A Foras (Out) maintained its visibility during the pandemic. Besides calling attention to the unethical growth of military spending concurrent with the lack of investment in public health during the COVID-19 crisis, the movement engaged in mutualistic action against pandemic-related issues, such as isolation, social exclusion and resistance; this hybridized the mobilization, relying on the significance of solidarity, community and the nature of public life. This case study examines this shift in the ethics and politics of engagement ethnographically. By making social inequality, exclusion and isolation more visible, mutualistic practices act in the social justice arena as a ‘purposive orientation’ within a system of opportunities and constraints. This case study offers an example of a grassroots social movement renewing its space of knowledge production by widening its agency in the direction of social justice and rethinking territorial and human security. The article thus provides an expansive, up-to-date understanding of how imaginaries and practices activated around solidarity, security and safety are recasting society in southern Europe in the wake of COVID-19. It contributes to the debate around caring democracy in social movements studies by rethinking the significance of caring infrastructures and, ultimately, the meaning of solidarity and trust.

Keywords: anti-militarism, solidarity, pandemic, mutualism, caring democracy

Introduction

This article explores how urban activists from the Sardinian anti-military occupation movement A Foras (Out), an open assembly of territorial committees, overcame the constraints imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. To cope with the overwhelming situation introduced by the pandemic, and to maintain a focus on the ethical issues of growing military spending during such health crisis, the movement relied extensively on social media at the regional level. At the same time, influenced by its countercultural milieu, the local chapter of the urban activists diversified and expanded their practices in the direction of solidarity, looking at territorial

concerns as a broadened and renewed field of action, and recruiting volunteers outside of the A Foras circle. From a broader political viewpoint, these tactics reacted to the worsening deprivation, vulnerability and social exclusion engendered by the pandemic in the island's main city, Cagliari. Therefore, the A Foras members in this urban node moved into the arena of social justice by helping initiate Mutuo Soccorso Kasteddu (MSK), a mutualist network. Aligning with other national groups belonging to the antagonistic political culture, the MSK integrated the opposition into neoliberal policies such as international solidarity, environmental justice, food sustainability and gender issues, all of which were included in the mutualist framework.

The case study discussed in this article points to mutualism as an opportunity to break isolation and infringe on mobility restrictions, and, further, as a driving force to guide collective engagement. For the MSK, mutualism responds to the urgency and the extraordinary nature of the situation engendered by the lockdown and aims to break political and social isolation to tackle the growing social vulnerability left unaddressed by institutional bodies.. By evoking responsibility as a collective 'obligation to care', rather than as an individual act or an institutional task to manage the COVID-19 emergency, urban activists progressed towards a culture of solidarity stimulated by the 'moral shock' of the imposition of limited freedom of mobility, one of the longest and most restrictive in Europe, and the increase of unmet needs. Moral shock acts as 'the functional equivalent of social networks, drawing people into activism by building on their existing beliefs' (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995, 498). While moral shock may not always be beneficial to recruitment (Wrenn, 2013), in this case, it motivated participation and benefitted stagnating social networks.. The growth of social exclusion and inequality during the pandemic mobilized activists and non-activists, allowing urban members to recruit me outside the anti-military occupation environment, thus laying the foundations of the initial MSK network. Early research on mutual aid suggests that the nascent self-help groups might meet the criteria of social movements in responding to contentious situations by addressing community needs (Katz, 1981, 151). MSK moved towards the social justice arena by acting against social inequality, exclusion, precariousness and isolation through practices of solidarity in everyday life.. It attempted to challenge the dominant codes 'whose models of organization and solidarity deliver a message to the rest of society' (Melucci et al., 1989, 12)). Our case study offers a grassroots example of a renewed space of knowledge production (Chesters, 2012) unfolding as an agency of solidarity that introduces a fresh and responsive trajectory to answer to the new community and movement's needs. It contributes to the study of social

movement practices during the pandemic by showing how severe constraints on political and social organizations have been turned into opportunities (Bringel & Pleyers, 2020; Della Porta, 2020; Pleyers, 2020). We examine the proposition that MSK prioritized a new order of social concerns with the cultivation of ‘subjectivities of solidarity’ by differentiating actions in the direction of social justice, which seem to prefigure an alternative society shaped around relationships of vulnerability. We investigate whether the terrain of solidarity, as an ‘experimental’ response of social movements to the pandemic emergency in the direction of a free space (Polletta, 1999; Evans & Boyte, 1986), recasts the importance of community and collective empowerment

Considering how mutualism evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic by impacting social movements’ practices in light of specific meanings of solidarity, we study these practices and visions through Tronto’s infrastructure of care to show how care activities are a response to COVID-19 emergencies, mobilizing the capability to stimulate new social imaginaries by practicing, among others, ‘the qualities of solidarity and trust’ (Tronto, 2011, p. 262). . In the following paragraphs we emphasize how mutualist practices ground relations and networks of care. First, care activities originate as a reaction to emerging community needs, in response to the exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. Second, the empirical data show that care activities create relations that empower social actors by deploying a circular process of givers and receivers. In reviewing the four relational levels of Tronto’s caring democracy through the mutualist practice of *spesa sospesa* (on-hold shopping),¹ we propose a reshaped model of care based on circular relations that mobilize volunteers, donors and receivers. This model, which we call mutual caring democracy, contributes to advancing the ethics of care (Held, 2006) and the caring democracy (Tronto, 2013). It also enriches the debates on mutualism and care by framing mutualism as a powerful, radical caring practice that responds to unexpected and calamitous events as well as a way for social movements to react to constraints by opening a new opportunity to change practical aspects in contentious activities and, thereby, empower communities.

Mutualism, Care and Solidarity in the Time of COVID-19

Like other forms of agency that emerge in times of crisis, solidarity arose across the globe during lockdown, reactivating grassroots movements and local groups to cope with the pandemic and avoid isolation (Pleyers, 2020). Greek clinics and volunteers shed light on

‘contagious solidarity’ (Cabot, 2016; see also Monforte, 2020, Teloni & Adam, 2018) as acts of solidarity (Della Porta, 2018): a new collective action demonstrating the inextricable ties between resistance to neoliberalism and marginality. Looking at the propagation of mutualistic agency in the global North and South, as the pandemic distress creates the conditions to be responsive to care, mutualism sparks individual and collective reflexivity in the ethics of care, allowing us to rethink ‘in more fruitful ways how we ought to guide our lives’ (Held, 2006, p. 3). Even if this focus is neglected in social movements studies, we partake in Santos’ (2020) estimation of the valuable contribution of care theories to the general discussion. He demonstrates in his research that a care-based approach to mobilizations is fruitful to understand the complexities of solidarity actions, mapping activism and showing the ways to foster solidarity (Santos, 2020). In this frame of the ethics of justice, mutualistic practices are distinguished from charities, as different mutual solidarity brigades around the world exemplify. Care relations are practices that build trust and connect people to envision a political change towards regenerative ways of life. It is a radical act (Spade, 2020, 13), a powerful force in a system that is unresponsive to social isolation and marginalisation. Mutualism is conceived as a diversified set of concrete practices that emphasize social solidarity and relationships of care in a free, self-organizing and non-hierarchical association outside of institutional, state or market relationships.

Kropotkin’s seminal work on mutual aid (1908) widely influenced later scholars in various disciplines, including ethnographers working on horizontal movements and political anthropology (Federici, 2012; Graeber, 2009; Scott, 1998; Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, 2020; Mies & Bennholdt-Thomsen, 1999). As Preston and Firth (2020) underline, mutualist traditions differ with regard to terminology and key authors – for example, in their views of communal cooperation, the state, the subject and collective action. However, in the practices of mutualism we observed and participated in, although these differences existed and were noted by some of the more theoretically inclined volunteers, they were ‘nuances’ reflecting MSK’s composite nature, which attracted activists and non-activists from different environments with a strong, unanimous focus on mutualist practices.

The COVID-19 crisis gives a dramatic understanding of taking the responsibility of ‘the global community on which the future health of our mutual environments depends’ (Held, 2006, p. 119) and of caring about each other, giving a distinctive meaning to solidarity and trust and contributing to redefining the conceptualization of free space (Polletta, 1999; Evans & Boyte, 1986) as ‘the prefigurative group created in ongoing movements’ (Polletta, 1999, p. 11). These

are spaces, such as the MSK, which resignify the meaning of being part of a community and prefigure the possibility of a different political and social life. In this direction, ‘if they can provide services (healthcare, food, education) that successfully compete with mainstream service providers, they may become enduring indigenous institutions and may supply leaders and participants for later mobilizations’ (Polletta, 1999, p. 12).

The emphasis on care involves various sets of practices and concepts that are always political, as Tronto (1993) anticipated and as is more generally discussed in analyses on care, justice and democratic institutions (e.g. Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2006; Noddings, 2005). Caring, in Tronto’s view, is ‘a “species” activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible’ (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). Care is a process of four interrelated phases: *caring about*, that is, ‘someone of some group [noticing] unmet needs’; *caring for*, assuming the responsibility to respond to those needs; *caregiving*, the actual work of giving care; and *care receiving*, the response of those whose needs are met (Tronto, 2013, p. 22). This infrastructure of care is a genuine commitment to creating the conditions and societal responsibility for a caring democracy (Tronto, 2013). The fieldwork analysis of this case study revisits Tronto’s frame to interpret the strategic adaptation of contentious mobilization in COVID-19 time. We show how actors mobilize reacting to the macroscopic urgency through the *care giving*, identified in the mutualist practice. The understanding of certain needs (*caring about*) and the establishment of the MSK network and its practices (*caring for*), implements caring relations and actions, that create a circular sharing of goods and activate the response of those whose needs are addressed (*care receiving*). Tronto’s caring democracy model is functionally reshaped by the mutualistic practices by responding to different goals, in what we call *mutual caring democracy*.

Methodology

Our ongoing ethnographic fieldwork has benefitted from previous fieldwork on A Foras, which began in 2014 followed by an ethnographic content analysis (Altheide, 1996) of local media productions that framed the risks related to military activities (Author1 & Maddanu, 2018, 2020). This long-term ethnographic project fostered a relation between the research team and the movement: narrative interviews, workshops and participant observation at meetings and protest events deepened that trust. A shift occurred in 2019 with the award of a research grant on military occupation, with which we planned a collaborative Future Technology Workshop to co-produce the movement’s new vision. The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the early

stage of this process. Lockdown froze all activities: the militants felt trapped, and their practices shifted to digital tools. We regularly interacted online with the movement during lockdown, followed their social media channels and joined online meetings. While social media campaigns allowed the group to remain visible, reflexive discussions among some members based in Cagliari prompted them to look for new practices. Serendipity, together with the input coming from mutualistic initiatives started in countercultural environments they associate to, finally helped to break the stalemate.

The activities began on the 1st May 2020 with the daily door-to-door delivery of food boxes to anyone who requested help via MSK's dedicated phone line, which was advertised on billboards, in leaflets, and through WhatsApp messages sent to MSK contacts. The organization changed considerably over time, and the looser, more improvised initial set-up evolved into the current structure: a call centre and logistics unit; weekly food collection and delivery groups, which reach more than 100 families a week; various subgroups and initiatives, from a free hairdresser to clothes swaps to teams working on housing rights, gender issues and sports. At the weekly assemblies, mostly held online, the group discusses organizational issues that have emerged during the week, as well as political actions and strategies. The latter are discussed in more depth during general assemblies, which are held in person.

Since the initial stage, the food box has consistently been seen as the epitome of the group's practice, and it has developed a complex and ever-growing urban solidarity network: engaging citizens in *spesa sospesa* (on-hold shopping), recruiting market sellers and collecting unsold fresh food (bread, meat and vegetables) at the end of the week, distributing the boxes and fighting food waste. We joined MSK in late autumn 2020. From the beginning, our direct involvement in these mutualist activities combined ethnographic observation with participation in group practices. We collected food from Saturday morning markets, helped to assemble food boxes, delivered them and chatted with the recipients, and worked in the call centre. Like many members, through this process we discovered parts of the city we had never seen before – sometimes in awe of their beauty, often outraged by the institutional and material neglect they had suffered. In parallel with these activities, we conducted interviews with MSK members, both anti-military occupation militants and not, via Skype. Because of the city's infection rate, we could conduct very few interviews face to face, although we did have several informal in-person conversations while participating in group activities. After months of participation in MSK activities, the interview setting put us back into the unequal power relationship of 'researcher versus researched', which we tried to mitigate by offering to be interviewed

ourselves. All the in-depth interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and subsequently analysed with NVivo.²

Collective reflections during the weekly meetings – held both online and in person to discuss organizational and other issues related to pandemic uncertainties – improved the group’s reflexivity, albeit with ups and downs. Seven months of weekly interaction and shared practice contributed to a cooperative environment leading to a co-production of knowledge (Lozano, 2018). We judged that this approach might effectively unveil the meanings of this new path of solidarity, interpreted as an outbreak of collective action – not merely ‘acting against’, but acting tangibly in everyday life, within the gaps left by the welfare state.

Why embrace this deep participatory approach? Our research unfolded during exceptional times: the protracted pandemic situation affected our fieldwork as well as the movement’s own practices and political perspective. After observing and participating for such a long time, we are in the position in which we work together with the activists as co-researchers in producing new knowledge.

Militarism, Anti-Militarism, and Anti-Base movements

A Foras action is inscribed in the world mobilization against militarism and the military that spans islands and internal territories around the globe. This section highlights the key issues related to this cycle of protest to historically foreground A Foras’ antibase movement and its strategy, and to emphasize the distinctiveness of A Foras’ Cagliari branch in terms of local actions and network during the pandemic.

Starting from the late 1950s, a broad spectrum of global mobilization emerged embracing denuclearization protests, anti-war campaigns, peace movements, women’s anti-militarization campaigns, anti-base movements and resistance campaigns, and practising mass gatherings, local protests, lobbying, petitioning, hunger strikes, and non-violent and violent action. The extent of anti-military protests reveals the porosity and magmatic nature of mobilizations that respond to contentious politics. Actors’ protests often occur in multiple arenas, making alliances and sharing agendas at local and cross-national scales. Common ground is found in universal values of democracy, territorial rights, sovereignty or environmental protection, or in the integration of anti-base campaigns into broader struggles for democracy and national self-determination, such as in Okinawa and Puerto Rico (Gerson, 2009). Specific actions might

intersect with the defence of human rights, social justice and peace, as in Vieques (McCaffrey, 2002); or support conscientious objection worldwide. Emphasizing the complexity of this activism, Cockburn suggests that it can be categorized under three headings: anti-war, anti-militarism and peace. Understandings of this global phenomenon converge in broad practical objectives and repertoires of action, generating a configuration of ‘movement of movements’ (Cockburn, 2012, p. 16) to better catch the sense of this flowing activism, whose coherence reconnects with the values of peace, justice and democracy to account for the roots of the ‘war problem’ (Cockburn, 2012, p. 238).

The United States’ military expansion around the globe, with different degrees of success, has been met with grave concern by ordinary citizens (Lutz, 2009). The US has consolidated its international power by settling more than 1,000 overseas bases (Vine, 2009), a crucial factor in the maintenance of American dominance (Gerson, 2009). Local citizens’ mobilization against US bases calls attention to the harmful dynamics of the militarization of global space. A colonial interpretation of these dynamics has been advanced by anthropological studies of Asia and the tropics through the analysis of regional cases such as Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Okinawa and the Philippines (e.g. McCaffrey, 2002; Silva, 2004). As the distinctive literature on feminism and militarization has argued, these movements are gendered (e.g. Cockburn, 2012; Enloe, 2014). Women have been active in providing leadership and independent ‘anti-base movements after the experience of sexism inside an anti-militarist campaign’ (Enloe, 2009, p. xii). Women in Okinawa, for example, were ‘exposed to gender-based military violence for over 60 years’ (Akibayashi & Takazato, 2009, p. 261). Their remarkable struggle for demilitarization achieved a milestone at the 1995 Beijing World Conference on Women, giving a concrete configuration to anti-military feminist theory (e.g. Cockburn, 2012; Cohn, 2013; Enloe, 2014; Feinman, 2000). Their lived experience foregrounded intersectionality and the interrelated forms of military violence – physical, structural and environmental – attesting that the military is a violence-producing institution based on misogyny and racial discrimination. International networks of feminist peace and anti-military activists present their vision for demilitarization through a three-pillar strategy based on the protection of the environment where we live, the satisfaction of our needs for survival (food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, education), and the recognition of cultural identities and human dignity (Akibayashi & Takazato, 2009). Such global action intensified twenty years ago following the south-east Asian protests in a new collaboration with global justice movements (Yeo, 2011).

Reviewing the history of anti-base movements, Vine (2019) underlines that this activism offers a symbolic manifestation of anti-militarism by challenging daily military operations and employing non-violent forms of action, although some movements adopt tactics such as breaching bases' fences, throwing rocks, violating military territory and challenging the monopoly on knowledge about military activities. Vine's (2019) comparative longitudinal study attests to such activism's significant political-economic, military and sociocultural impact, and to links and networks that raise questions related to sovereignty. The dialogic and strategic relation to anti-militarism is important: opposing the reality of military bases does not necessarily involve antagonism to the military. Anti-base movements are often subject to fluid forms of action that connect peace groups, non-violent actors and local committees. A Foras is part of this global movement, opposing territorial occupation for military activities.

A Foras: The Anti-Military Occupation Movement

Sardinia is one of Europe's most densely occupied territories in terms of military bases and facilities. Due to its geostrategic position, the island has been a hub for weapons testing and interforce training by the Italian army and NATO since the late 1950s, and it has been subjected to constraints similar to those faced by islands in south-east Asia. Sardinia's residents have protested against this dispossession down the years. Weak protests emerged in the 1960s, when the island's militarization was legitimated as a path towards the modernization of a backwards society (Author1 & Maddanu, 2018). In the 1970s, the anti-nuclear movement protested against the US base on La Maddalena, a small island to the north of Sardinia that hosted the home port for the US navy submarine tender *USS Howard W. Gilmore*. Worries about suspected pollution generated by the submarine's nuclear fuel led to Italy's first national movement against US military bases, with protests reiterated in 1976, 1988 and 1991. A more general anti-American sentiment spread among the peace movements, strongly affecting this protest cycle. A Foras emerged as an open assembly of different groups and Locally Unwanted Land Use (LULU) committees after a successful action in Teulada, south-east Sardinia, to stop the 2015 NATO war game Trident Juncture, one of the highest profile NATO war-game simulations.

A Foras's actions accorded with Vine's (2019) characterization of anti-base movements: they included challenging police and military authorities to subvert the spatial order, cutting fences³. The successful shutdown of Trident Juncture in 2015 injected the movement with euphoria and gave rise to breaking through perimeter fences at subsequent rallies. This combination of

energy and hope encouraged the youngest activists to think about more ambitious campaigns and imagine a possible future without military occupation. The A Foras activist community chose to constitute itself as an open forum (Haug, 2013) resulting from the progressive convergence of heterogeneous political experiences and actors from scattered groups acting as LULU local committees. This open assembly launched a political manifesto calling for territorial sovereignty, a decontamination programme and adequate compensation for the misuse of land. Similarly to other anti-military protests around the globe, they mobilized to defend their home, and they gathered to act out of a concern for the environmental harm engendered by military activities.

LULU committees' direct social actions declare the centrality of territory and residents' right to decide their own future. Opposition to military land occupation 'opens the prospects to advance social and economic change' (I.16). The three political pillars of A Foras strategy – close down, clean up, reconvert are connected to the envisioned life - human health and animal and plant protection - for a future free of the military training space.

The pandemic arrived during a static phase of the anti-occupation movement, when the activists' role as local facilitators had considerably weakened. As elsewhere in the global north, the Italian state was pressured to focus its healthcare responsibilities (Cox, 2020). A decade of neoliberal policy in regional spending had led to the closure of several local hospitals following public spending reviews conducted under European Union requirements. However, military spending had not been subjected to the same restrictions and had continued to increase. In light of this discrepancy, the connection between growing military spending and underinvestment in public health had been a topic of debate long before the pandemic hit. As the pandemic began to pressurize the public health system, the movement collectively decided to seize the moment and publicly expose this issue by running the digital campaign + *Hospitals - Military*, to support health workers and demand a cut in military spending in favour of consistent investment in public healthcare. In various infographics A Foras argued that the public healthcare spending cuts must have been linked to the consistent expansion in military spending over the years. Indeed, military spending grew globally even in 2020⁴ (SIPRI, 2021) Although this campaign creatively maintained visibility on the issue, it did not fully resolve A Foras's internal stasis.

The Pandemic, Reviewing and Renewing Practices: Giving Presence Is Revolutionary

New Avenues to Action

The practice of the Volunteers Brigades for the Emergency, mutual aid groups of popular solidarity founded in Milan in March, 2020, rapidly spread around the peninsula among the antagonistic culture and leftist circles, inspiring the core group of A Foras activists living in Cagliari. The activists grew up on squatting experiences locally (Sa Domu-Studentato Occupato) and in Northern Italy, in cities such as Torino (Askatasuna) and Bologna (V16). MSK action is inscribed in this political culture and in the upspring of politicized volunteering engagement as a critique of austerity politics (Monforte, 2020), resignifying solidarity and mutual aid as a terrain of political and social action ‘to reconfigure the relationship between individual, social and political-economic bodies-in-crisis’ (Cabot, 2016, p. 155). As A Foras members felt isolated and stuck in anti-occupation militancy, feeling helpless in the face of the pandemic, the Cagliari group shared their ongoing reflections on urban and political transformation with non anti-military activists, who were the larger component of MSK. This led them to reassess mutual aid, which they had previously dismissed and usually negatively associated with charities, following this experimental space of radical action reframed by the Brigades of Emergency. As in the case of social clinics in Greece, the MSK solidarity network emerged in response to a crisis – in this case, the COVID-19 pandemic, – as a new form of collective action that ‘focus[es] less on explicit political mobilisation and more on addressing basic, often urgent, human needs’ (Cabot, 2016, p. 154). Lockdown exacerbated the need they had already observed in the urban area, urging them to act out of the individual need to do something and out of frustration with the movement’s stagnancy. A broader perspective is emphasized in the A Foras members of MSKs reflections vis-à-vis the meaning of opposition to military land occupation and the agency to advance social justice. A Foras members of MSK considered mutualism the most urgent response and preeminent strategy to the crisis, overcoming political and militancy differences. The pandemic hybridized previous practices, widening the vision, reshaping human security, and re-presenting mutualism as a different model of solidarity:

To me, security is trusting people, meaning that if we do politics together I need to know I can trust the people I am with, [...] either when we are cutting the fence of a military base, or in everyday life, [...] including the recipients. (I.6)

Mutualism concentrates on finding new ways to foster alternative social justice. The establishment of a mutualistic circular relationship through the *spesa sospesa* infrastructure is

described in Figure 1. The root of the practice is to care about. Activists carry out a double role when it comes to identifying unmet needs (*caring about*) and assuming the responsibility to address those needs through their network activities (*caring for*). Beneficiaries are care-receivers who sometimes get involved in mutualistic practices by stimulating a fluid circularity in which they also care about and for the growing network. Donors, who make the materiality of *spesa sospesa* possible, connect activists and sellers, as well as producers and consumers to respond to social needs, thus redefining care relations.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

For the activists involved, MSK's direct action responds to new and different needs engendered by the pandemic. First, it breaks lockdown isolation and personal loneliness at a time when 'the disorder of everyday life is so massive that it upsets daily activities to the point of re-examining priorities in a new light' (I.14). This mobilization can be interpreted as resistance, an arena 'in which people engage with power relations in their everyday life' (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2020, p. 3), by exploiting the mobility granted to charities and solidarity groups. Since the beginning, this engagement with power relations was at the core of MSK activity. Starting with the practice of the food box, the intense personal urgency all members felt about breaking isolation and power relations in everyday life – 'to say "stop!" to the general situation [...] I needed to act, I could not stand still' (I.3) – found in mutualism a common set of self-defence tools that affirmed the fundamental importance of safeguarding human relations and presence as "a way to construct a desirable self" (Polletta, Jasper, 2001, 290). A recurrent reflection among young MSK members foregrounded the broadening of pre-COVID conditions of precarity, insecurity and concern for the future. Resistance came to mean courageously persisting together against constant everyday adversity – solitude, lack of affective or work stability, an existential precarity that dates from well before the pandemic – nurturing relations of collective trust and strength. 'Security and safety to me mean presence. [...] It means safeguarding the relationships we are building, both within MSK and in our network, and in the politics of alliances' (I.6).

We interpret the urgency of this action as related to the tangle of personal emotions experienced during lockdown and to the necessity to fight against blatant social injustice: 'to do that, we should resist the lockdown rules. [...] The food box is a material answer to immediate survival needs. [...] We know that our solution is a small one' (I.11).

Indeed, the moral shock (Jasper & Poulsen, 1995) had been the catalyst: ‘we took a while to define a political perspective’ (I.3). Together with inspiration from the rise of mutualist initiatives, this pushed the activists to enter the political field through solidarity practices they had previously rejected as top-down and detrimental. Breaking isolation gave mutualism the ability to strengthen the care relations and renew the practices through which activists reconnect with territorial issues: ‘an instrument to enter houses, talking to people and reacquiring the forgotten language of proximity and of the bottom-up construction of shared practices’ (I.16), as a way to reduce “those things that make human lives insecure” (Woehrle, Coy, Maney, 2008, 145).

Building Horizontality

As with much of the mutualism that arose during the global pandemic (e.g. Cox, 2020; Fiedlschuster & Reichle, 2020; Martínez, 2020), for MSK members, mutualism means horizontality, ‘building something together, not being benefactors’ (I.3), and rejecting any idea of the volunteer as a top-down donor. The activists do not define themselves as heroes:

Of course, we do this with generosity, but I believe in the class struggle. [...] It’s more being part of a community that we want to create. It’s not an exchange, it is a desire to create a society, create networks between us. (I.2)

Going beyond the food box delivery has been a lasting topic in MSK’s internal debate and political vision. The food box satisfies urgent needs, but it is a starting point, a caring step to build long-term relations of trust and dialogues leading to a common political goal. Since ‘[trust] is highly important for care, and to a caring society’ (Held, 2006, p. 57), week by week the food box deepens the trust among those involved in the solidarity network, activating circles of reciprocity – some recipients become volunteers, or give free services such as tailoring face masks for the network members.

As a deliberate encounter with the urban reality of marginal neighbourhoods, direct action helps activists to break ‘the loop [...] of being stuck in theoretical reflections’ (I.6) and to look at the actual political situation in the territory beyond the usual mobilization.

The territorial dimension of social direct action, defined by Bosi and Zamponi (2019) as a process of reconnecting individuals and collectives, acquires a different significance for MSK. Week by week, MSK’s intersectional and intergenerational composition began to constitute a

distinctive feature of its valued hybridization. An A Foras activist member of MSK recognized the following:

In comparison with previous actions, meetings, assemblies, considering the heterogeneity, everything took place naturally [...] and this will pay off compared with the activist ghetto. [...] Being a project that starts with a practice [food box] and not from a political thought or a theory, the group heterogeneity helps to be inclusive with a simple gesture, and to feel part of the group. [...] It helps people to breathe, not to feel locked in a box. (I.16)

The arrival of new entrants with different political experiences or novice to political engagement created a fluid and operational environment. Although MSK activists with no previous political experience worried that they would encounter a closed group, they found instead a diversified, open reality that encouraged a sharing atmosphere. This increasing fluidity made possible the passage of activists both to and from MSK and A Foras. Action came before an explicit political strategy, encouraging this dynamic. MSK activism was primarily action- and practice-led, focused on solving everyday necessities to activate a hopeful change:

It [the practice, the opening towards others] is an instrument. I don't know if this will be a good practice in the future, to open opportunities to work in the [marginalized] neighbourhoods – the work, there, is solidarity. For now, and during the COVID time, it is the most important thing that has happened in this city, and in many other places. (I.16)

Political reflexivity was secondary: 'the strength of MSK is [...] the primacy of action over any politics' (I.6). However, the group felt the need to differentiate their own sense of solidarity: 'in this moment, relationships and solidarity to me are the best remedy against apathy, individualism, selfishness. [...] The political work to be done should go in this direction' (I.16). Mutualism, thus, means creating relations, networks and collaborations grounded in practices that inspire an informal economy outside the state and the neoliberal logic – a gift economy that creates community relationships prefiguring political change. This aspiration is beautifully captured by the answer one MSK member gave when we asked about the meaning of solidarity in the time of COVID-19: 'giving presence is revolutionary' (I.7). Solidarity builds a collectivity that acts concretely, recognizing the priority of action over any subsequent political elaboration. This is not to say that solidarity and care relations are

straightforward. Some connections might leave activists frustrated, while others are enriching and filled with warmth, becoming ways of thinking about channels of societal change. Anger was a particularly entangled emotion for both the activists and the food box recipients, as in similar initiatives (Gravante & Poma, 2020). It was easily verbalized during recipients' phone calls to MSK to book food deliveries. Some of the people we spoke to – during phone calls or during deliveries – felt ashamed to ask for food and offered rationalizations for their requests, while others openly described their dramatic living conditions; some enjoyed long conversations, while others treated the call as a routine service. An activist so epitomizes the complexity and circularity of care relations:

So, anger gets you, because you are touching injustice first-hand; when you get such a call, you are really seeing injustice. [...] And [there comes] self-realization, because [...] if you are talking with that person, you write down the name and the address, and then on Saturday you deliver the food box and go meet them. This is something very beautiful with MSK – that you are not a part of an assembly line, but you can create [relations]. [...] You can see the complete cycle of the action. (I.1)

The Food Box: The Relational Tool

The food box is at the centre of this cycle. Since the beginning, the food box has been a multifaceted performing and learning tool, instrumental to ground relations rather than to convey an ideology, and two years on, it remains a prismatic object charged with different meanings. It is the persistent centre of various discussions in the group, such as the fear and risk of being trapped by contingent, everyday material needs, but also the possibility that it can reveal the intersection of different issues. The mutualist idea of horizontal relations is not without its problems, particularly regarding the food box:

Since the beginning, the food box has been a problematic object. It is a solidarity initiative, relevant in this moment, that makes people closer, but it is also a barrier between the giver and the receiver. [...] I would like the receiver not to thank me, because I would like them to be aware that it's their right. (I.13)

The deliveries further uncovered social inequalities and marginalities, tracing an alternative map of the large urban area based on its invisibilized needs and its diffused relationships of care. Activists also described territorial discovery, such as never having properly visited a council house before, or never having seen open, street-level drug trafficking. Saturday shifts are a pile-up of emotions and discoveries that 'activate moral categories which are also

politically useful' (I.13). All members share moral emotions in Jasper's (2018, 5) sense: 'the satisfaction that we feel when we do the right thing, a kind of deontological pride, but also when we feel the right thing, such as compassion for the unfortunate or indignation over injustice'.

Besides the immediate and limited response to the material needs of local residents who call for help, week by week, the food box has become a shared learning tool: 'we learned to customize the food box by listening to the recipients' needs' (I.3). The practice has impacted food chain actors – market sellers, producers, consumers. In particular, the food boxes gradually change the recipients' dietary habits; some complain ironically about the large quantity of greens, which they are not used to consuming. Some unfamiliar vegetables prompt conversations about the variety available beyond that sold by large retailers and about recipes to prepare them, leading to deeper knowledge and expanding personal contacts:

Given the possibility to eat veggies, they didn't buy processed food, [...] reducing the cost of services, plastic and pollution. [...] If we calculated the amount of plastic we saved, with an average of ninety deliveries per week, [...] which are deliveries for two to four people, there are 300 people who, every week, have reduced their ecological footprint and who have changed their diet. (I.1)

The food box represents the territorial network activated by *spesa sospesa*. Activists have become an established, familiar presence for the market vendors who participate in the food collection. They wait for the activists early on Saturday afternoons, one of the busiest times of the day and they take pride in being an active part of MSK's circular economy – if activists forget to drop by, or skip their stall by mistake, they seek them out and scold them. Although other charities and individuals also collect unsold produce, MSK activists have been able to build a solid network that is always recognized despite the shifting membership of the food-collecting group.

Overall, the food box contains the MSK worldview: it excludes processed food in favour of unsold and donated local fresh produce from small shops and city markets, and it is created on the basis of relationships between donors and market vendors, MSK members and recipients. It encapsulates the *spesa sospesa* infrastructure between the activists, the donors and vendors, and the recipients, who together activate a circular flow of goods and caring relations grounding the mutual caring democracy.

An Open Final Reflection

This article shows that acting in the direction of social justice as a reaction to the pandemic reframes mutualism as a matrix of the subjectivities of solidarity and redirects caring democracy as a relevant concept for social movements studies. The system of solidarity arising from the COVID-19 crisis unlocked an embryonic infrastructure of care that needs to be nurtured and developed (Paulson, 2020). Mutualistic interactive process frame a renewed strategic capacity, as a way to learn and experiment to capitalize on opportunities and overcome constraints (Schock 2013). MSK shares a common experience of the pandemic as a crisis of care, asking how to put people's needs before economic profit and developing 'new bases for organising around longer-term needs and broader demands' (Cox, 2020, p. 25). This is part of a new global shift towards sharing concrete actions that enhance and reframe solidarity by widening and changing social movements into 'vibrant, self-organised and fully bottom-up "networks of care and mutual aid"' (Martínez, 2020, p. 20). The COVID-19 crisis broke the social order, calling into question social priorities, reordering social hierarchies and reshaping security and safety. The act of caring emerged out of a new configuration, beyond the approach of charities, that evolved into action for political change. For MSK, this means going against neoliberal society, creating a space of dissent, reversing the processes of individualization, precarization and territorial exploitation, recasting the community and building a common path of collective action. Solidarity is the gifting gesture, the sign to make contact, to recognize human existence. In the mutualist political imaginary, day by day, this relation activates a potential reciprocity, shaking the recipients out of apathy and reorienting the political message for a new vision of human security through solidarity.

Fieldwork interpretation partially meets Tronto's description of a caring infrastructure. Mutualism concentrates on finding new ways to foster alternative social justice. The circular flow of goods and relations activated by activists, donors, sellers and beneficiaries shapes what we define as the *mutual caring democracy* based on the establishment of a circular relationship in which those who care (in our case, activists, and donors) assume responsibility for identifying needs and meeting them. Here, MSK's efforts lie in creating an aspiring gift economy based on horizontality and potential reciprocity between those who *care about* or *for* and *care receivers*, outside the capitalist economy and the state. The infrastructure of *spesa*

sospesa recasts mutualism and care by resignifying community ties and trust, widening MSK. It activates a space of knowledge production through a circular network of actors practicing solidarity, while prompting care as an experimental field for the activists that fosters social, political and cultural transformation in the territory – building a new subjectivity, collectively and personally. Solidarity is more than a political practice; it is the frame for a new subjectivity that will construct a new political imaginary. Mutualism builds solidarity as horizontal, non-hierarchical practices, distinguished from charities, foreseeing a social empowerment which prefigures political change as an ‘imaginative social movement project’ (Cox, 2020).

Endnotes

¹ Spesa sospesa revived and expanded the Neapolitan tradition of caffè sospeso, where a coffee shop customer pays for an extra coffee, which is then offered to someone who cannot afford it. This practice of ‘on hold shopping’ was widely adopted by Italian mutualism during the pandemic.

² To safeguard participants’ privacy in accordance with the American Sociological Association’s code of ethics, we identify interviewee extracts with the letter I followed by a number (I.1, I.2 and so on).

³ Italian law stipulates that any testing or training activity must be suspended if the military space is violated.

⁴ Total global military expenditure rose to \$1981 billion last year, an increase of 2.6 per cent in real terms from 2019 (SIPRI, 2021).

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