ACME An International Journal for Critical Geographies

The City from Below: What a Challenge! Exploring Human Sustainability in Rome's Self-Managed Places

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Abstract

Urban self-management is an activity that can be exhausting and may not always be sustainable over the long term. This is partly because it involves not only typical activist activities but also the management and maintenance of a physical space. Drawing on a study conducted with activists from five self-managed spaces in Rome, I analysed the mechanisms that explain why some individuals continue to engage in activism for years, despite various challenges, while others choose to leave. It became clear that the decision to stay or leave results from a delicate and complex balance between centripetal forces (which hold the activists back) and centrifugal forces (which compel them to leave). To prevent the balance from tipping towards leaving, self-managed spaces must be more than just arenas of struggle and interaction; they must also be spaces of care, which can make these experiences not only valuable but also sustainably humane.

Keywords

urban self-management, human sustainability, care, commons, urban movements

Preamble

This article was originally published in Italian in ACME (https://doi.org/10.14288/acme.v23i3.2338). When deciding whether to write about my study of Rome's self-managed places, I initially chose to write in Italian to ensure accessibility for my study participants, without whom the research would not have been possible. Choosing Italian

was a challenge, given the broader academic influence of English papers. Nonetheless, the need to make the findings accessible to the participants was paramount.

A few weeks later, I recognised that limiting the publication to Italian restricted my ability to share it with another vital audience: my colleagues, many of whom do not speak Italian. This recognition prompted me to take advantage of ACME's multilingual policy to translate the article into English. Publishing in languages other than English, as supported by an international journal like ACME, is essential not only for ensuring research accessibility to participants but also for challenging the Anglocentrism prevalent in geography. However, (re)translating these articles into English is crucial as it helps to bridge diverse geographic, linguistic, and cultural gaps, thereby facilitating broader understanding.

Introduction

Experiences of urban self-management are increasingly attracting the attention of universities and institutions. This interest is not only because, in some contexts, they ensure the care and liveability of otherwise neglected territories (Cellamare 2014) but also because some of these practices are seen as potential sources of inspiration for urban planning itself (Nardis, Olcuire, and Fortuna 2022). However, institutions often reduce these initiatives to a depoliticised formula, treating them merely as a form of cost-free land maintenance (Campagnari and Ranzini 2022). By contrast, both activists and scholars emphasise the scope and political significance of these practices, viewing some local (mostly city- or neighbourhood-based) experiences as genuine transnational nodes of activism (Membretti and Mudu 2013) or as commons (Di Feliciantonio 2017). The economic aspects of these initiatives have also been recognised in the scientific literature (Mudu 2012). Activists themselves have addressed these issues, as evidenced by the publication of '*Centri Sociali: che impresa!* (Social Centres: what an enterprise!)', in the 1990s, which sparked a discussion of the economic sustainability of these spaces (Moroni, Farina and Tripodi 1995).

Despite these diverse approaches, one fundamental aspect seems to have been partly overlooked: the 'human sustainability' of these practices. This term refers to the ability to maintain a psychological and physical balance that supports people's well-being. Taking care of a space for free – whether a park or a community centre – can be so taxing that one might question the liveability and human sustainability of these experiences for those who engage in them daily. The *spatial* nature of these experiences underscores their centrality and distinguishes them from traditional forms of activism.

Research on this question comes mainly from the sociology of social movements. For instance, Cox (2011) addresses activist burn-out and "personal sustainability", while King (2005) explores whether 'emotional reflexivity' can sustain activism in the long term. By contrast, geographic studies have been somewhat reserved, with notable exceptions like the work of Brown and Pickerill (2009), which melds reflexivity and "emotional sustainability" with an analysis of activism's spatial dynamics.

However, according to some activists, the issue of sustainability is rarely explicitly addressed within Rome's self-managed spaces. At most, during conflicts, there are tentative efforts at group introspection, but these seldom tackle the structural problems of collective functioning or dysfunction.

Motivated by these observations, I dedicated part of my doctoral research to exploring the 'human sustainability' of practices within Rome's self-managed places[1], focusing on the life paths of 22 activists and former activists from five such spaces: Forte Prenestino (FP), Villaggio Globale (VG), Casetta Rossa (CR), Casale Alba 2 (C2) and Communia (CO). This paper presents my analysis using an original approach that combines biographical, emotional and spatial dimensions. This method aims to deepen the existing literature by showing to what extent the spatial nature of this form of activism influences its human sustainability.

The term "self-managed places" (SMPs) refers to the various ways in which collectives of residents and/or left-wing political activists illegally occupy abandoned or threatened buildings to set up self-managed social, cultural and political activities. This definition encompasses a broad range of experiences, including "*centri sociali occupati e autogestiti*" (self-managed and occupied social centres), which are squatted properties that have become hubs for social, political and cultural events, which first appeared in Italy in the 1980s and have spread widely across the country (Mudu, 2004, p. 917). They represent the oldest and most recognised element of SMPs. Since there have been many similar activities under different names, I chose the more general term SMPs to describe these pieces of the city built from below, regardless of their designation. SMPs are simultaneously spaces of political struggle and organisation, as well as leisure, culture and interaction, run by collectives that are theoretically open to all. In his classification of occupation practices, Pruijt (2012) categorises Italian social centres as 'entrepreneurial squatting', which includes all five of the SMPs studied. However, the author reserves 'political squatting' for those occupations primarily aimed at conflict. While all the SMPs I studied are undoubtedly political, only CO seems to precisely fit this category, with its '*autogestione conflittuale* (conflictual self-management)' initiated in 2013 by a Trotskyist collective, primarily aiming to stir the political consciousness of the local communities and encourage them to struggle within their own communities. C2, by contrast, can additionally be categorised as 'conservational squatting' because the occupation of this farmhouse by local residents was meant to prevent its conversion into a prison facility. FP, a 19th-century fortress occupied since 1986 that hosts numerous underground activities, falls not only under 'entrepreneurial squatting' but also 'squatting as an alternative housing strategy' since it also serves as a residence for some activists. VG, originally a pavilion of the former slaughterhouse squatted in 1990 and a cultural and meeting space for migrants, has transformed over time. Initially, it fell under 'deprivation-based squatting' as it housed individuals in need, but it later became known for hosting techno parties before transforming into a venue for art and social crafts. CR, a small house in an abandoned park occupied in 2001, now hosts a variety of social, political and cultural activities and runs a restaurant through a cooperative. It appears to be the only one exclusively categorised as 'entrepreneurial squatting'.

My work is mainly based on the accounts of 22 activists from these SMPs, selected to ensure the sample was as representative as possible in terms of age (ranging from around 20

[1] In the English version of this article—as in my PhD thesis, originally written in French—I prefer to use the concept of 'place' rather than 'space', as I did in the Italian version. As geographers know, these terms are not synonymous; the former conveys the idea of a space that is lived and meaningful to those who inhabit it. However, since activists consistently use the term "*spazi*" (spaces) to describe the spaces they self-manage, I found it more appropriate to retain this term in the Italian version.

to 70), gender, sexual orientation and years of activism. My relationship with some of these individuals began well before this research, as I was an activist in one of these SMPs myself. However, this prior connection did not impede material collection; on the contrary, it often proved advantageous, as the interviews conducted with these individuals were among the most fruitful.

In this paper, I will begin by defining the theoretical framework used in the research. I will then analyse the persistence of activism, which hinges on a delicate balance between centripetal forces, which encourage one to stay, and centrifugal forces, which compel one to leave. In the following section, I will examine cases where centrifugal forces prevail, sometimes causing people to leave after decades of activism. Finally, I will discuss the initial process of activism: recruiting new members. This last aspect is particularly important not only from a political perspective but also in terms of the human sustainability of these practices.

Life histories, emotions, spatiality

My research addresses the topic of social movements by proposing an approach that integrates different theoretical, methodological and conceptual traditions in an original way.

My approach to activism has largely centred on the biographical dimension, which has long been overlooked in this field (Nolas, Varvantakis, and Aruldoss 2017). However, it is crucial not only for understanding how and why one becomes an activist (Pudal and Fillieule 2010) but also for unravelling the complex links between the political, spatial and emotional/affective spheres. To analyse the life paths of SMP activists, I relied on the concept of the 'activist career' (*carrière militante*) – a notion originating in symbolic interactionism and later adapted to the study of activism in the Francophone context. This concept describes the series of stages and events in a person's life that explain their activist path (Pudal and Fillieule 2010). I applied this typically sociological approach with a distinctly geographical perspective, adding a focus on the spatial dimension, which has often seemed underexplored.

Working from the concept of activist careers has shaped how I view and interpret the facts observed, leading me to reinterpret some classical approaches in the sociology of social movements. For example, the idea of a rational calculation between losses and gains is often used in this discipline to explain why one persists or disengages from activism – i.e., one remains involved because the benefits outweigh the costs. In this context, scholars often discuss the 'costs' and 'rewards' of activism (Pudal and Fillieule 2010). While this analysis of costs and rewards has many interesting implications, my approach – largely rooted in the processual logic of activist careers – extends beyond the mere rational calculation of pros and cons. In fact, while there are certainly *centrifugal* forces – those that lead activists to consider abandoning their activism activities – and *centripetal* ones – those that encourage them to persist in their commitment – persistence or abandonment cannot be explained as a simple calculative process. Rather, it is the result of complex mechanisms that cause these evaluations to shift significantly based on various internal and external factors, which vary over time. For this reason, instead of speaking in terms of costs and rewards, I prefer to refer to "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces, understood as dynamic and interrelated elements that influence whether one remains an activist or considers quitting. This approach allowed me to move beyond the static, analytical and symbolic framework of the cost/reward binary while still acknowledging its undeniable analytical value.

Engaging with the concept of activist careers has inevitably involved addressing the question of emotions. This is not entirely new, as numerous studies since the 1990s have incorporated emotions into the study of social movements (Jasper 2011). Geography, too – with its 'emotional turn' (Williams 2001) – has explored the spatial dimension of collective mobilisations through the lens of emotions (see, for example, Caro 2020; Brown and Pickerill 2009). Some works have focused on physical and affective states, which have emerged as particularly central to my study. This is evident, for instance, in the research on love and activism by De Feliciantonio (2018) and Wilkinson (2017) or, particularly relevant to this article, in the study of weariness by Wilkinson and Ortega-Alcázar (2019). Like these authors, my research has shown how these and other emotional states – often perceived as inherently positive or negative for political activism – can be ambivalent and, at times, deeply contradictory. Once again, one of the distinctive aspects of integrating the spatial and biographical dimensions, which characterises my approach, is that it has allowed me to situate my observations on the role of emotions in activism within the complex dynamism of activists' life paths and the spaces they inhabit.

Finally, a further important part of my study, also straddling the spatial and emotional dimensions, is the concept of 'ambiances'. These are understood as the complex set of sensations, emotions and perceptions that arise from an individual's experience of a space (Thibaud 2015). This concept, developed in the context of Francophone cultural geography, shares some similarities with 'affective atmospheres' (Anderson 2009), whose role in stimulating or inhibiting activism has been analysed by Lancione (2017). However, my analysis differs in that it is once again linked to biographical observation and is, thus, profoundly processual, dynamic and longitudinal. The atmosphere of a space and the emotions it provokes vary not only from person to person or group to group or according to the phases of the mobilisation underway but also in relation to the individual life paths of the participants. The experiences that each person accumulates throughout their life contribute to shaping how they perceive and interpret an atmosphere. As we will see in one of my case studies, this can have a profound political impact.

This diverse set of theoretical and conceptual tools has enabled me to understand the complex mechanisms that explain how and why one becomes an activist, what keeps some engaged for decades and what drives others to disengage. This kind of analysis is essential to understand the long-term viability and effectiveness of activism. This is not only of academic interest but also, as many activists themselves have pointed out, a political issue. Ensuring these initiatives are effective is inherently political, and it is precisely the desire for this research to be useful to such movements – movements of which I have been a part – that makes it, in a way, 'activist research'.

The precarious equilibrium of persistence

If the beginning of a self-management experience is often characterised by enthusiasm and a collective desire to participate, this is largely attributed to the 'spatial' nature of this form of activism. Indeed, collaborating with a group of people to take care of an urban space is an exciting, albeit exhausting, experience. In the case of the five self-managed spaces I studied, the early days were also challenging due to their relatively dilapidated condition, which required considerable collective effort. Yet, the excitement of revitalising a neglected space, securing the rare opportunity for ordinary residents to shape an urban space and doing so

with a united group of people meant that, "At the beginning, everything is nice and easy. That is, you're there and you do everything, everyone does everything – from cleaning the toilet to participating in higher political initiatives",[2] as Giovanni, a CR activist, explains. "I was happy even to get tired", adds Rachele, a former CO activist. Over time, however, the novelty of spatial involvement risks becoming a burden. According to Giovanni, what was once new and thrilling becomes routine, and the initial euphoria slowly dissipates: "Everything becomes more complicated (...) there's fatigue, there's routine... nobody wants to clean the toilets, because it's normal... everyone wants to do beautiful things, not ugly things. And then (...) the ordinary management of a space also becomes tiring." At this point, whether to remain in a self-management collective requires weighing the delicate balance, perceived by each activist, between the forces that encourage staying and those that drive leaving – that is, "centripetal" and "centrifugal" forces, respectively. These forces are not univocal but often ambivalent and contradictory. Various factors, whether personal or collective, can lead each activist to perceive the same dynamic as repulsive rather than attractive or to change their interpretation over time, highlighting the importance of process analysis.

At first glance, some of these forces may seem more closely connected to the fact that this form of activism occurs in a physical space. In reality, however, the spatial nature of these activist experiences is sure to exacerbate all forces involved, primarily because a space and its management require a significant co-presence of activists.

Centrifugal forces

Almost all the interviewees stated that they had, at least once, felt a desire to pause their activism, to take a break or, as Janis (CO) put it, at least to "loosen" the grip that activism has on their lives. Various aspects of activism generate centrifugal forces: fatigue, dissatisfaction, loss of interest, sometimes dysfunctional decision-making systems, conflicts and the management of the space, among others.

The fatigue resulting from activism was the aspect that those interviewed most emphasised as a centrifugal force. This feeling, which can lead to physical and mental exhaustion (burn-out), is attributed to factors that are both specific to this type of activism and more general.

This force seems to be most directly linked to the spatial nature of these activist experiences. Activism in a self-managed space is particularly exhausting because maintaining a physical space open to the public involves not only engaging in activities traditionally associated with political activism (e.g. holding meetings, handing out leaflets, organising and participating in demonstrations etc.), social activism (e.g. organising Italian language courses for migrants) or cultural activism (e.g. organising screenings, concerts etc.) but also managing the physical space itself. Owning a space requires regular cleaning, carrying out repair and maintenance work and taking shifts during public events to open and close the facility for community use. After the occupation of CO by a university collective, it became very tiring for Carla (former activist) to continue leading university mobilisations while managing the space that her collective had occupied. This dual responsibility compelled the activists, Carla included, to adopt "ultra-activist rhythms that are much more invasive of one's life because,

[2] All interview excerpts (originally in Italian) were translated by me.

at times, that's all you do." As responsibilities accumulate with age, maintaining these rhythms becomes increasingly challenging, as Lorenzo (FP) points out: "How do you work 8 hours a day, 40 hours a week, and then spend your evenings here... what are you, a machine?"

Therefore, ensuring that these rhythms remain manageable and that individuals can maintain a healthy balance between personal, work and activist commitments is essential.

Several factors related to the management of an SMP were identified as potential centrifugal forces: the sometimes slow and inefficient functioning of assemblies; the underlying power dynamics despite apparent horizontality (Freeman, 1972); and the impact of specific roles assumed by certain individuals or groups on the functioning of the collective.

Regarding assemblies, Lorenzo (FP) does not mince words: "The Forte [Prenestino] assembly has a big problem (...). We have a system that really drives you to exhaustion. When you get out of there, you feel dead." This sentiment is echoed by, among many others, Lello (former activist of C2), who emphasises the "tiredness" caused by attending assemblies that often "exhaust one's patience and take up a lot of time". In addition to political issues, the assemblies of self-managed places must also contend with managing the space itself, making them particularly complex and time-consuming.

In addition to this lack of pragmatism and effective decision making, another element that makes assemblies challenging to endure is the fact that "in the end, it's who is more charismatic that counts" (Matteo, CO). Lorenzo (FP) echoes this sentiment, quoting the famous drag queen RuPaul: "[It's] not just about who has the most charisma and who is the most confident [but who has a] deadly mix of charisma, uniqueness, talent, nerves: a monstrous mix between all these things makes you... a perfect drag!" Despite the irony, this activist is convinced that "people with very good ideas often fail to make them count because they lack the confidence to speak out at the right time".

Conflicts between individuals or groups within a self-managed space are important centrifugal forces. These conflicts can arise from varying political expectations and strategies, differing lifestyles of activists, interpersonal relationships that may deteriorate or an unequal distribution of tasks. Moreover, the constant co-presence required by the spatial nature of this form of activism exacerbates the risk of conflicts, especially compared with forms of activism that do not involve the daily management of a material space.

Centripetal forces

By contrast, centripetal forces motivate activists to remain in their SMPs. Some of the various centripetal forces identified during my research align closely with the cost/reward scheme typical of the sociology of social movements. From this perspective, organisations aim to secure the loyalty of their members by offering rewards such as paid positions, roles of prestige and/or power and other benefits that enhance self-esteem, impart a sense of power or offer "*notabilisation*" (i.e. recognition from engaging in the public arena) and even the esteem, affection and admiration of their colleagues in struggle (Gaxie 2005). In my research, I have found that to offset the costs of activism, these "social incentives" identified by Olson (2003) in the 1960s are often the most significant. These can, for instance, take the form of "recognition" that older participants give to younger ones over time, such as when they are first given responsibilities or when they are recognised as members of the group. For

Michel from C2, realising a few months after his arrival that he had become "part of the family, because [he is] recognised within the Casale [Alba 2]" was an extremely strong social reward.

The sense of belonging to a group is a significant centripetal force that organisations often exploit, consciously or unconsciously. Kanter discusses this in terms of "communion", which is the internal-external dialectic enacted to strengthen the sense of belonging (Pudal and Fillieule 2010). In CO, non-activists are sometimes ironically described as "Muggles (*babbani*)", a reference to non-wizards in the Harry Potter series. This is because, as Janis (CO) explains, her activist group feels much like "a herd". The spatial nature of these settings exacerbates this phenomenon; not surprisingly, the interviewees often use the metaphor of the inner and outer worlds to differentiate self-managed places from the rest of urban space and society.

The sense of belonging and recognition can also extend beyond one's self-managed place, such as within local movements or other SMPs. According to Ivan (FP), this recognition can even become a way "to make oneself cool" on the outside, especially in the case of a well-known place like FP.

This recognition can encompass more than just belonging to an SMP; it can also include some personal qualities valuable in activism, such as charisma or courage. This kind of recognition might occur when one often speaks in assemblies, makes impactful interventions during demonstrations or is considered the go-to person in a certain field (e.g. feminist issues and approaches to organizing). Thus, being recognised as an activist of a particular SMP contributes to *notabilisation*. While this can naturally develop through experience, former CO activist Rachele notes that it can also be instrumentally induced by older activists to maintain the loyalty of younger members. For instance, by inviting a particular person to lead a political meeting and pushing them into the spotlight during public initiatives. The effects of these small moments can be profound, as in the case of Rachele, who, after leading an important assembly, began to "feel powerful", to "feel part of the leaders (...) I felt included, I felt like one of them [the older and more established activists]." This highly motivating aspect helped her to remain committed to CO, at least for a while, despite the numerous centrifugal forces that had long challenged her continued involvement in this SMP.

Centripetal forces can also be found in the satisfactions derived from the collective's activities: a successful mobilisation, a successful event, the realisation that one's actions have, even slightly, changed the city and society, the privilege of shaping an urban space without being among the 'powerful' or the fulfilment of having manually built something tangible as a collective. Several individuals from C2 express satisfaction from their successful efforts to prevent a building in their park from being converted into a business. As Cinzia says, such a victory "also gives you the strength to move forward". Janis (CO) recalls how, after their previous space had been evicted, the neighbourhood's positive reaction surprised her: "The day they evicted us, we had an assembly where there were a lot of people, and this was another thing that made me say 'OK, then all this effort, all these hours, all this effort is worthwhile.'" Compared with other forms of activism, the spatial nature of activism in self-managed spaces often means that the rewards are somewhat immediate. Indeed, one does not always have to wait for a mobilisation to succeed to feel gratified; satisfaction can come simply from the very existence of a place saved from abandonment and speculation and valued by the neighbourhood. This appreciation is both collective and personal, as Gina

(former FP, currently CR) points out, "[The space] is also partly a result of your actions. It exists because I contribute to ensuring it continues to live."

Sometimes, centripetal forces can take very personal forms. Many interviewees recognise the impact that their SMP has had on certain aspects of their character, such as shyness and lack of self-confidence, which seem to be reduced by these 'spatial' experiences of activism. Individuals who were initially rather solitary, like Rachele, Carla or Luca from CO, emphasise the change the activist experience has had on the way they relate to other people. The collective – or even communitarian – dimension that characterises many SMPs is an important stimulus for learning to be together, especially when one finds oneself devoting a lot of time to material space, whether it be gardening, rehabilitating the space after occupying it or simply managing it daily. Rachele (previously from CO), for example, before becoming an activist, "[was] a very different person, very introverted, didn't speak with anyone (...) [she] had a very gloomy mood, very sad". Thanks to activism, she "discovered a whole new dimension of (her) own. I discovered that it was nice to always be in a group, all together". Of course, beginnings are not always easy, and many of the interviewees took months before they were able to speak in front of the whole assembly of their SMP, hence the importance of it being as inclusive and open as possible, like the collective and the place itself.

The experience of activism in an SMP can also have a major impact on identity, in terms not only of belonging to a group but also of something more intimate. For example, two activists discovered their sexuality partly through the self-managed places they were involved in (Lorenzo, FP; Rachele, former CO). A third activist associates some of his first steps towards discovering his sexual orientation with his first visits to self-managed places in his hometown. When Lorenzo entered FP, still hesitant about his sexual orientation, "[he] found [him]self in an environment where they told [him]: 'Look, whatever you are is cool'", which contributed ("definitely, I'm sure") to his coming out. For Rachele, it is particularly the spatial nature of activism in a self-managed place that played an important role in her discovery of sexuality:

> Since [the occupation of CO], my life changed. I lived there, slept there every day, washed there, I stayed there [all the time]! It really changed my life. I started to relate to sex and to my sexual desires, which previously... I just wasn't interested, you know? It was something that didn't interest me. It's not that you say: 'you feel it'... no, I really didn't give a fuck! (*laughs*)

Sociality can also be considered a powerful centripetal force, especially in self-managed places. As we have said, compared with the activists of parties, trade unions or associations, SMP activists spend a significant part of their time in the place they manage, either for the ordinary management of the space or for specific times and periods (organisation of events, post-occupation periods when the space has to be cleaned, periods when there is a risk of eviction etc.), for numerous meetings or simply to hang out. In addition to this spatial factor, these are hybrid spaces where ludic and political functions converge: the 'sociable' dimension of these experiences – with parties, concerts, dinners, screenings etc. – contributes to facilitating the birth and development of friendships, sentimental and/or sexual relationships, which Jeff Goodwin has called the "libidinal constitution" of social movements, or the set of interpersonal relationships that bind their members (1997). This statement by Gianni (previously from FP) perfectly captures the fusion relationship that can develop in some cases: "Here [at FP], I wasn't just doing 'p-o-l-i-t-i-c-s' in quotes, but I was living my life here, my social relations." The lives of the activists are sometimes inextricably intertwined within these spaces

of life and community that are the self-managed places, to the point of becoming – as Lorenzo (FP) puts it – "a second home" and the participants "a piece of my family, the one I chose". This function appears even more important for those who experience an unpleasant family situation, difficult relationships or a certain precariousness. The parallel with the "Houses of the People" from the Labour movement in the 19th and early 20th century is particularly interesting: Unlike the bourgeoisie, the working class did not have sufficiently comfortable domestic spaces to find rest or relief, and therefore, certain solidarity structures, such as the Houses of the People, also served to compensate for this lack, becoming collective alternatives to the private home (Kohn 2003).

The relationships that are forged between activists, but also between them and the space itself, are therefore fundamental to understanding why, despite the demanding nature of this activity, one continues to participate in activism in an SMP.

Sometimes, certain group dynamics hold people back despite them wanting to leave, such as cases where the assembly proves to be a space "not only for making decisions but also for resolving tensions and conflicts and keeping the group together" (Alfonso, former VG). For Marina (FP), those are "the most beautiful assemblies, [they] give goosebumps", and they help to make her stay. In the words of Brown and Pickerill (2009), these are the assemblies that manage to give space to that "emotional reflexivity" that is so important for the sustainability of activism.

Finally, one often remains an activist not so much because of positive aspects but because – somewhat like in any relationship – putting a definitive end to it is not easy and, indeed, always comes at a cost. Leaving means giving up dynamics and habits that have settled, sometimes for years, in a space where most of one's relationships have been concentrated and for which one has invested time and energy. Leaving means fundamentally changing the geography of one's daily life and one's social and spatial practices. This feeling is even more pronounced when the mechanism of 'renunciation' occurs, i.e. the tendency to deprive oneself of relationships outside the activist group (Pudal and Fillieule 2010). The time variable can also increase these "exit costs". "[The FP has been] my entire life. My life. That's all I did", Gianni confessed to me. We can imagine how difficult it is in such cases to choose to move on and leave everything behind. Sometimes, the cost of leaving takes the form of the sense of responsibility that develops towards the SMP, the collective or the cause itself.

Research has also shown the extent to which social pressure from colleagues can be detrimental. Rather than trying to hold back a fellow activist who wants to take a break or slow down the pace of activism by inducing guilt (which seems to happen frequently), it would be better for collectives to be more sensitive and flexible. Pushing someone not to follow their needs may hold them back for some time, but it risks, in the long run, facilitating burn-out or causing a definitive break, as several cases in my study show.

Finally, what were initially centripetal forces can gradually become centrifugal forces. One example among many is that of sociability and intimate relationships, which can degrade and even lead to defection in some cases. Or, more simply, over time, one wants to see new faces and go to other places, as Janis sums it up: "Before, my sociality was through CO or [other] occupied spaces [i.e. SMPs]. Totally, 100%. Then, at a certain point, I got a bit fed up with always having to deal with the same people."

The point of no return: when centrifugal forces take over

In the previous pages, we identified the delicate balance behind persistence in activism. If all the activists, at some point in their careers, feel the desire to end their involvement, why do only some actually follow through? Through the testimonies of various former activists, I have traced the lengthy process that leads from initial doubts to eventual abandonment. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for the long-term success of an urban self-management project.

While all the centrifugal forces identified contribute to some extent to the abandonment of some individuals, three primary reasons seem to explain most of the defections encountered in my research. These reasons may or may not be associated with conflicts.

The first can be described as a shift towards a negative perception of one's own organisation, occurring when some activists begin to change their view of their group to the extent that they believe it no longer aligns with what it should represent or achieve.

The second reason involves doubts arising from the physical and mental fatigue caused by activism, which is even more pronounced in self-managed places due to their 'spatialised' nature.

Finally, the third reason concerns activists who, without experiencing conflict, disappointment or burn-out, begin to doubt their involvement in activism because it demands too much time away from other life activities or aspects.

As we have seen, certain mechanisms can slow down the defection process (the interviewees took between two and nine years to leave), such as the various centripetal forces that can temporarily renew the motivation for activism or the specific reactions of other activists when they share their doubts.

For a defection to occur, doubts and centrifugal forces alone are often not enough; a convergence of several conditions is typically required for defection to truly make sense in the eyes of the activists. For example, the decision also to leave often depends on whether there are concrete alternatives to activism. If, as we said, it is not easy to leave a space after years of activism, having other (whether individual or collective, and more or less concrete) projects can help with the transition.

Moreover, according to the accounts of the former activists interviewed, defection occurred when initial doubts were intensified by triggers that made the desire to leave their SMP compelling and urgent. These triggers were essentially of three types.

First, conflicts that can become the straw that breaks the camel's back. In some cases, the spatial nature of these experiences can exacerbate conflicts, as they may lead to diminishing or completely halting attendance at one's SMP. This has important psychological consequences as it disrupts one's daily social and spatial practices. Rachele, for instance, left after her doubts, accumulated over the years, were compounded by the deterioration of her romantic relationship with a long-standing CO activist, who had become increasingly violent. Out of fear, Rachele stopped attending the SMP; the (lack of) reaction from her fellow members of the feminist and LGBTQI+ collective at CO was the tipping point:

> They all went along with it, none of them ever said anything to me, not even, 'Why aren't you coming?' But not on a personal level, on a political level... 'Why don't you come to the meetings anymore?' (...) Besides, they all knew I cared about that political space. Nothing. (...) The impression I had on a psychological level [was] that they preferred her, a violent person, to me.

In the second group of cases, it is the accumulation of different events that form a real 'perfect storm' leading to the final decision. For Carla, for example, the fatigue linked to the spatial nature of activism, which had brought her to the brink of burn-out, was compounded by tensions within the collective that she found herself unwillingly having to deal with. Added to this, there was a "personal situation [that] delivered the coup de grace". The accumulation of all these situations in a short space of time led Carla to conclude: "You know what? Fuck it (...) I don't want to be part of this anymore."

And finally, temporal and biographical ruptures can provide the opportunity to implement decisions that have been forming for some time. For Gianni, after 30 years at FP, it was the realisation that he "couldn't give [to the project] anymore. And when you can't give anymore, it means you're drained and need to recharge." For Gina, who left FP after several years (and 10 years before joining another space, CR), it is simply the completion of her PhD and the start of a new chapter in her professional life that prompted her to leave and seek a radical change in how she organised her days.

Understanding these dynamics is important because, as Giovanni of CR explains, they can trigger a series of events where "you get tired, then you argue, and then you split up. From 100, you become 20, then 10, then three, and then the [SMP] closes, as so many have closed in this city."

Knowing how to attract: renewal as a necessity for the human and political sustainability of self-managed spaces

A final important aspect concerns the capacity of urban self-management activities to attract new people. This capacity is not only a measure of the 'political' success of a self-managed place (since, of course, if you fail to expand your activist base, you fail to make a substantial impact) but also a critical factor in its human sustainability. To quote Giovanni (CR) again, when the initial euphoria fades and "everything becomes more complicated", the ability

> to always keep a [self-managed] place open for participation is fundamental; without this, a human community – whether of activists or otherwise – is always close to burn-out, always close to alienation from the space and, ultimately, risks resenting it. Because you can spend years doing more or less the same things (...) and instead, it's the act of renewing, of finding people who participate with you, who bring new ideas and always breathe life into the space with new things, that serves as the best antidote. But we haven't always been able to [achieve] that.

Put another way, the ability to attract new faces contributes to making self-management more liveable, especially since the spatial nature of this form of activism requires both physical effort and motivation to run the space. Of course, as some SMPs have shown, the arrival of new people can also disrupt existing balances and sometimes lead to conflicts. However, it seems

to me that, most of the time, this is a desirable form of renewal rather than a disruption to be avoided. For this reason, whatever the outcome, understanding the mechanisms that draw people to SMPs seems crucial to me.

The factors that explain the choice to engage in a self-managed place are multiple and complex. In my research, I had to analyse various dynamics ranging from family upbringing to professional experiences, passing through adolescence, first loves, musical tastes or even sexuality. All of these personal dynamics can, in one way or another, influence people's choice to become politically active and join the collective of a self-managed place. Yet, the decision to engage is driven not only by personal factors but also by elements tied to the spatiality of these activist practices. To understand the human sustainability of these experiences, focusing on the spatial devices inherent to material space that make self-managed places more attractive to newcomers is particularly useful in this article.

In the sociology of social movements, we refer to "*dispositifs de sensibilisation*" (awareness-raising devices) as the tools activists use to elicit reactions capable of encouraging people to support a cause or movement and eventually engage with it (Traïni 2009). For *classic* activist experiences such as parties, associations or trade unions, these devices mainly include posters, social network campaigns, public events, banners, speeches at demonstrations etc. However, in the case of SMPs and other experiences where activism takes place through material space, the space itself, in my opinion, should be considered among the awareness-raising devices typically associated with political activism. Just as an NGO poster of a malnourished polar bear aims to provoke an emotional reaction to *raise awareness* for its cause, the atmosphere of a self-managed place must evoke positive emotional responses from visitors if the collective intends to attract new users or recruit activists.

A space can, depending on the person experiencing it, provoke a sense of "topophilia" (a positive feeling towards a place) or "topophobia" (a disaffection if not clearly an aversion) (Tuan 1974). Self-managed places are not immune to this dynamic. Their appearance, or rather their *atmosphere*, will influence who is drawn to this space and, more importantly, who will stay. Referring back to Thibaud (2015), I define atmosphere, or "ambiance", as the interaction between a person and a space, specifically focusing on the perception and feelings the person experiences. The notion of ambiance describes how each individual perceives a space in all its complexity (i.e. the sensory experience of a place).

Atmospheres can mobilise people and provoke resistance (Lancione 2017). The ambiance of a self-managed space, by evoking feelings of topophilia or topophobia, determines who the space will attract and push towards activism. The ability of space's ambiance to stimulate topophilia depends largely on the people present in the SMP and their ability to "welcome and make [visitors] feel good", as Michel (C2) explains. This cannot be taken for granted, as many of the interviewees made remarks similar to those made by Matteo (CO) regarding a social centre he attended as a student, which ultimately deterred him from getting involved: "Although I liked the things they did, I didn't feel [comfortable]; it didn't feel like an open place."

Especially in the case of public events, a self-managed place will attract not only activists but also individuals drawn by the programming of the SMP in question. These visitors contribute to influencing the ambiance of a place and, in turn, its appeal. Different types of events and modes of communication cater to specific audiences, and the timing also plays a

role (attending a techno night at FP on a Friday night is a different experience from visiting it during a Sunday morning farmers' market). Some people highlighted the 'diversity' of those who frequent certain SMPs as one of the most attractive aspects. For example, the strongly intergenerational character of C2 was a key point that impressed many of the interviewees. Similarly, CR attracted Silvia and Gina through the participation of people from the neighbourhood, including many elderly individuals, which contributed to their decision to join the collective. Both described it as a place that is "welcoming to all". The diversity that characterises CR's users becomes even more striking when Gina compares it with that of her previous self-managed place, FP, which she ironically describes as "a threat to biodiversity", noting that the people who frequent it are much more "aesthetically homogenised" than those at CR. "Clothes one way, hair one way, piercings one way, tattoos one way": For Gina, this uniformity is "a bit repulsive" and risks "only attracting a certain type of audience". By contrast, the fact that CR is particularly "biodiverse" is very appealing to her, and she believes that this diversity contributes to sending "a different message to the outside world, also in terms of the usability of the space".

The people who frequent a space are both a product of the ambience of a self-managed place and a component of it (Thibaud 2015). The ambiance of a space influences who will frequent it, while their presence, in turn, also affects the ambiance. However, people are not only contributors to the ambiance; to better understand what makes a space more or less attractive, it is also necessary to consider the physical traits of the space itself.

Among these traits, the visual language of SMPs (i.e. all the graphic elements intended to explicitly communicate a message to users) emerged as particularly important in my research. The 'chatty' nature of the walls in Roman SMPs, filled with tags and sometimes radical political messages, may resonate positively with some people but repel others. Being aware of this is important if you want to manage who your space attracts. For example, the activists at C2, an SMP that aims to engage a broad, intergenerational audience from across the neighbourhood, have chosen to keep their walls relatively "quiet", mostly avoiding confrontational language and instead favouring evocative but non-divisive phrases. As Michel puts it, "If your goal is to get as many people as possible (...) and then spread your ideals, let's say that certain writings might not allow you to do that". According to him, "You have to understand the dynamics of the neighbourhood, who frequents the place", and find the right language to foster productive dialogue. If this sometimes means avoiding certain phrases, it does not mean compromising one's convictions ("just because I didn't write on the ACAB wall [does not mean] that I'm not against the police") but rather realising that "some people need to approach these realities a little more calmly".

The issue of cleanliness or state of maintenance of an SMP is another example of this. For Fabio from VG, the toilets symbolised the general condition of his SMP during what he calls the "techno phase", when the programming was almost exclusively night parties. At that time, "there weren't even any toilets anymore... I mean, there were toilets, but they were unusable, in the sense that no child, parent or sane[3] person would go in there!". Even if the VG activists at the time had wanted to have a more inclusive programme, it would not have

[3] The interviewee used the ableist Italian phrase '*sano di mente*,' which literally translates in English to '*sane in mind*.' We have retained this phrase to highlight the extent to which ableism is deeply ingrained in our society—through language and other means—even among individuals who identify as radical left-wing activists.

been effective due to the deteriorated state of the space. This realisation led them to understand that "if you want to be open to everyone like before, you need to return to at least a level where people feel comfortable coming inside".

Other elements also come into play, such as odours or smoking, whether it is cigarettes or cannabis. Although most SMPs claim to be anti-prohibitionist – and often allow indoor smoking without issue – some individuals are more sensitive to what Cinzia describes as "toxic air". This sensitivity is another reason why C2 has adopted different policies (without, however, reneging on anti-prohibitionist positions). It prohibits indoor smoking, making it an exception among self-managed places. According to Cinzia, this policy brands it as a "*posto bacchettone*" (whacky place), potentially making it less appealing to young people. While recognising the risk, Francesco, a young activist in the same SMP, firmly supports this approach: "I'm convinced of the path we have chosen because while other spaces may cater to drug use or rave, it's much more difficult to find spaces that foster dialogue between middle schoolers and retirees."

These practices are a few examples of how activists might conceive and manage their spaces to attract those outside their usual circles – that is, the activist and alternative communities. As always in the case of ambiences, the type of reaction (i.e. topophilia or topophobia) varies from person to person. Some elements that might appeal to some because they resonate with what Carmo calls "*l'esthétique de la résistance"* (2020) could be viewed negatively by others as signs of degradation or a lack of welcome. This is not to say that all SMPs should necessarily emulate C2's choices, but being aware of these dynamics can enhance their inclusive potential.

Conclusion

While the growing interest in self-management practices is undeniable, their long-term viability and liveability remain uncertain. Researchers and activists have somewhat overlooked the issue of human sustainability, which my study addresses by examining the life paths of 22 activists from five self-managed places in Rome. I explored why, despite numerous pressures to leave, some individuals persist in activism at the SMP for an extended period. The concept of a constantly oscillating balance between what I describe as centripetal and centrifugal forces offers a fitting metaphor for the mechanisms that influence both persistence and defection.

However, there is a risk that the balance may tip too heavily towards centrifugal forces, particularly in forms of activism where managing a physical space adds significant burdens to the already demanding tasks associated with political or social activism. These forces are more pronounced in settings where the material management of space intensifies the challenges faced by activists.

To mitigate defections, encourage persistence and make experiences of urban self-management truly (and humanly) viable, my analysis highlights several practical measures that might seem obvious but are not routinely practised in Roman activism. These include facilitating the reconciliation of private and activist lives without assigning blame; collectively dealing with and reflecting on problems and tensions that may arise in the group; being welcoming and open to the outside world; and fairly distributing responsibilities so that the burdens do not pile up on just a few people. In a nutshell, this approach involves thinking

about and putting into practice a collective model of *care* that encompasses both the spaces and individuals involved in their complexity.

From many perspectives, 'care' is already an integral component of these practices. Isn't the restoration of abandoned spaces and offering services to the community a way of caring for it and those who live there? Aren't the mutual aid activities that activists engage in to meet people's needs, while also fostering a sense of empowerment, examples of collective care? The centripetal forces most often identified in this research are those that characterise self-managed places as spaces of collective care where activists feel at home, find comfort and receive support.

To ensure that these experiences are humanly sustainable, it is crucial to create spaces that are truly open and welcoming for everyone and that care for the territories, communities and people who enliven these places with their time – beyond the logic of profit. It is these very people that activist groups often take for granted. Yet, without them, these experiences simply could not continue to exist.

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