

Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna
Archivio istituzionale della ricerca

Politics, conflict and “political” community: The case of Bologna

This is the final peer-reviewed author’s accepted manuscript (postprint) of the following publication:

Published Version:

Zinzani, A., Proto, M. (2023). Politics, conflict and “political” community: The case of Bologna. *POLITICAL GEOGRAPHY*, 106, 1-11 [10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102961].

Availability:

This version is available at: <https://hdl.handle.net/11585/938973> since: 2023-08-17

Published:

DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102961>

Terms of use:

Some rights reserved. The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://cris.unibo.it/>).
When citing, please refer to the published version.

(Article begins on next page)

This is the final peer-reviewed accepted manuscript of:

Zinzani, A., & Proto, M. (2023). Politics, conflict and “political” community: The case of Bologna. *Political Geography*, 106, 102961.

The final published version is available online at:
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2023.102961>

Rights / License:

The terms and conditions for the reuse of this version of the manuscript are specified in the publishing policy. For all terms of use and more information see the publisher's website.

This item was downloaded from IRIS Università di Bologna (<https://hdl.handle.net/11585/938973>)

When citing, please refer to the published version.

Politics, conflict and “political” community: The case of Bologna

Andrea Zinzani, Matteo Proto

Department of History and Cultures, Geography Unit, University of Bologna, Via Guerrazzi 20, 40125, Bologna, Italy

ABSTRACT

In the framework of critical geographies post-politics theory has discussed the depoliticization of *politics*, tech-nocratic urban governance and the nature of the *political* as a heterogeneous radical space of disagreement and solidarity. However, the concept of community in relation to post-politics and, in particular, the *political* requires further exploration. Building on Roberto Esposito's conceptualization of *communitas*, our article contributes to the theoretical reflection on *political* community by exploring the evolution of conflicting relations between institutional politics and urban struggles in Bologna, Italy. The findings discuss the fragmentation of the local *political* community due to the neutralization of dissent together with divergent and exclusive political stances unable to advance a shared front to challenge political mechanisms. In relation to this fragmentation, we reflect on the nature of socio-environmental struggles as a possible move to build a *political* community to advance new ontologies in the direction of environmental and climate justice.

1. Introduction

In the framework of critical geographies, this article reflects on interactions between contemporary institutional political processes, socio-spatial marginalization and the rise of socio-environmental claims and contestation in relation to post-politics theoretical debate and the concept of community.

Our research focuses on the city of Bologna, in Northern Italy, and analyzes the evolution of controversial and conflicting relations between institutional politics, related mechanisms, and the political space of social and environmental movements. Specifically, we aim first to critically analyze the governance mechanisms adopted by the Bologna city government to neutralize conflict and disagreement and undermine the space of the political. The case study of Bologna could offer significant insights to the post-politics theory due to its socio-political history and reputation as a radical and socially democratic urban environment. Bologna is interesting in relation to this theoretical reflection because of its contemporary ambition to be an experimental laboratory of progressive, inclusive and participatory politics at both the national and international levels. Indeed, in recent years the city council has promoted a wide range of governance mechanisms and formalized new, hybrid institutions aimed at building a bridge connecting academic knowledge and institutional politics with civil society claims and perspectives. Alongside these developments, an heterogeneous space of grassroots social and environmental mobilization has emerged to re-

politicize urban politics and demand an effective right to the city.

Our article adopts ethnographic methods, combined with policy and discourse analysis, which include participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and informal dialogues. Indeed, these combined social research methods enable the in-depth analysis of grassroots social and environmental movements and their related political nature, organizations, practices and visions.

As briefly stated, our empirical research and evidence could contribute to post-politics theoretical framework and especially its geographical debate on contemporary urban politics and conflicts (Anders Sandberg et al., 2015; Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019; Heynen, 2014). Indeed, drawing on the political thought of Marxist and post-Marxist philosophers and political thinkers such as Rancière (1999), Mouffe (2000), Marchart (2007) and Badiou (2010) among others, post-politics theory has reflected on the recent evolution of global political thought and the controversial and conflicting nature of contemporary political processes especially through an epistemological distinction between the space of *politics*, the *police*, and the arena of the *political* (Rancière, 1999; Marchart, 2007). Over the past decade, multiple scholars in critical geography have adopted post-politics theory to reflect on the urban, and space more generally, by discussing the nature of the *political* with regard to its heterogeneous roots, spaces, claims and practices of disagreement (Kenis & Lievens, 2014; Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019; Di Felicianantonio & O'Callaghan, 2020). In this context, the *political* community is often understood as something historically and

Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: andrea.zinzani4@unibo.it (A. Zinzani), matteo.proto2@unibo.it (M. Proto).

spatially situated and specifically grounded in the concepts developed by Rancière (1999) who identifies the realm of the *political* as a 'polemical common space' (see also Blakey, 2021; Dikec, 2005). Furthermore, in recent years several authors have proposed using the theoretical perspective of Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito (2010) on *communitas* to critically deconstruct and re-think the conception of community, moving well beyond conceptualizations of community as a common, shared identity (Bird & Short, 2013; Carter White & Minca, 2020; Inston, 2020; Richter, 2019). Following Aiken's (2017) reflection on whether community could be defined as post-political in relation to the neoliberalization of politics, through our empirical research we seek to contribute to this discussion by bringing the *political* into dialogue with the concept of community re-discussed through Esposito. Indeed, his theoretical lens offers post-politics theory an idea of community that goes well beyond the communal idea of sharing, but rather it includes an act of expropriation, a lack and it is considered as a point of departure. The case of Bologna, and especially its contemporary socio-environmental struggles, could resonate with Esposito's conceptualization of *communitas*. Therefore, our proposal aims to advance the debate on the relation between post-foundational political theory and the political community in critical geography scholarship. Recently, scholars in political geography such as Landau et al. (2021) and Blakey et al. (2022) have claimed for a more substantial engagement between post-foundational political theory and political geography. Blakey et al. (2022), in particular, suggest moving beyond the post-politics approach and the distinction between *politics* and the *political*, focused on the political event alone. Their proposal is to consider "how any order of politics necessarily takes place in the context of the political and how any political event occurs within and against the spaces of politics" (3). Despite agreeing with the necessity to understand the relations between *politics* and the *political* across space and time, we argue for the need to deepen the reflection on the very nature of the political community in the post-politics theory that could be fulfilled through post-foundational contributions such as Esposito's reflection on the *communitas*.

The next section of the paper provides a theoretical overview on the evolution of the post-politics theoretical framework, and especially of critical geography and political ecology debate on urban politics, conflict and the community. The following section advances the theoretical reflection on the political community through the analysis of Esposito's conceptualization of the *communitas*. The paper then focuses on politics, conflict and the community in Bologna through the analysis of neoliberal urban governance in Bologna and the rise of the political, through an engagement with four grassroots movements, and its subsequent fragmentation. The analysis, in relation with the theoretical dialogue between post-politics and the *communitas*, argues the potential reorganization and rise of a political community through environmental claims and especially through the efforts of Bologna's Environmental Struggles Network. The conclusion highlights the potential role of socio-environmental struggles as a possible move to build a *political* community to advance new ontologies in the direction of environmental and climate justice.

2. Politics, conflicts and the *political*: the post-politics theory and the political community

The theory of post-politics has emerged as part of a critical reflection and debate among Marxist and post-Marxist scholars within the post-foundational thought aimed at conceptualizing and analyzing the contemporary global political-economic context and its controversies (Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1999; Swyngedouw, 2011; Žižek, 1999). In this context post-politics theorists highlighted the depoliticization of politics and democratic political debate and the consolidation of technocratic regimes influenced by supranational institutions. Crouch (2004) and Mouffe (2005) have argued that the hegemonic power of capital combined with the depoliticization of policy-making mechanisms has reduced democratic spaces and

contributed to the rise of post-democracy. Indeed, Laclau (1996) and Mouffe (2005) add that the institutions of liberal democracies need to be questioned and reconfigured to enable and strengthen contestatory, emancipatory and democratic politics.

On the basis of this critical reflection, Rancière (1999, 2010) has advanced the conceptualization of *police* as a realm of institutional practices and procedures designed to consolidate a specific societal apparatus or governmental order and the related foreclosure of dissent. Despite some dissimilarities, Laclau (1996) and Mouffe (2005) have deeply reflected and discussed the concept of *politics* (*la politique*), specifically related to the complex institutional framework of processes, challenged by the consolidation of the hegemonic neoliberal order.

In contrast to the realm of *politics* or the *police* in Rancieran terminology, Rancière (1999) among with other scholars reflected on the *political* (*la politique* in Rancière's terminology) as the disruptive engagement with the *police/politics* distribution of places and capabilities making evident its sheer contingency. Politics not only emerges from within instituted police orders but also acts upon and transforms them by configuring "its own space" (Rancière, 2010; see also Marchart, 2007). In this perspective, the *political* can be conceptualized as an arena of radical contestation, a heterogeneous political space of dissent inspired by principles of solidarity and democratic egalitarianism and oriented towards the re-politicization and democratization of political processes at multiple scales (see also Badiou, 2010; Dikec, 2005; Swyngedouw, 2009). The *political* and its spaces manifest through the knowledge, experiences and struggles of social groups aimed to progressively empower dissent, influence democratic debates, consolidate bargaining power in political negotiations and reconfigure policies and the realm of *politics* (Dikec & Swyngedouw, 2017). Partially in contrast to this view and drawing on Heideggerian ontic-ontological difference, Marchart has advanced an epistemological and conceptual distinction in political thought between the concepts of *politics* and the *political*. Founded on Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of political antagonism as a moment that could overcome the given order and advance emancipatory radical politics, for Marchart the *political* "had to be introduced to point at society's 'ontological' dimension [...], while politics was kept as the term for the 'ontic' practices of conventional politics (Marchart, 2007). Indeed, this ontological political difference aims to deeply reflect on structures of subordination and highlight the political dimension of the social (see also Marchart, 2018).

The reflection on post-foundational thought and especially on the ontological difference was then further developed by scholars in critical geography such as Dikec (2005, 2012), Swyngedouw (2009, 2011) and Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014) in their discussions of the nature of *politics*. They emphasize the everyday procedures, strategies and practices of policy-making involved in *politics*, practices that are often naturalized and depoliticized, promoted by governments at different scales but deeply influenced by the visions and interests of powerful transnational actors. By linking the debate on *politics* to the framework of urban governance, Swyngedouw (2005) and Heynen et al. (2006), among others, have argued that policy-making, together with depoliticized participatory mechanisms, were adopted to foster consensus and legitimize strategic decisions often already formalized by governments and aimed at undermining divergent political positions and marginalizing dissent. Also the *political* has been analyzed by geographers with its heterogeneous and sometimes controversial nature in relation to urban politics. Swyngedouw (2009), Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014), Heynen (2014) and Dikec and Swyngedouw (2017) have delved more deeply into understandings of the *political* by analyzing the multiscale urban struggles of the 15-M *Indignados* and *Occupy!* movements. Indeed, by linking post-politics with critical urban theory and an urban political ecology approach, they have highlighted the need to re-center the urban *political* in terms of political negotiations and theorized the politicizing city. The role of the urban *political* in terms of radical political transformation has been highlighted by Lauermaun (2018) and Russel (2019) in relation to the 15-M *Indignados* struggles since 2011 and the

progressive rise of the New Municipalist Movement. Therefore, contemporary social movements aimed at reconfiguring the neoliberal order through claims of re-politicization, democratization and radical change currently represent heterogeneous spaces of the *political* at diverse scales: from local-level movements struggling to preserve urban green spaces, such as the case of Gezi Park in Istanbul, to transnational environmental networks demanding social and environmental justice (Ernstson & Swyngedouw, 2019).

In parallel to urban struggles and their emancipatory processes, the *political* has been discussed within the political ecology debate in relation to environmental governance and climate change politics. Swyngedouw (2011) and Machin (2013) among others discussed the depoliticized and post-political condition of global climate governance by highlighting consensus building dynamics, the suppression of dissent, and the need of re-politicization. To advance this perspective, other scholars investigated various transnational movements fighting for climate justice. Kenis and Lievens (2014), and North et al. (2017) among others explored climate activism networks in the post-political era, looking at different and contrasting strategies for re-politicizing the contemporary stage of *politics* and highlighting the need to strengthen a transnational *political* space capable of imagining alternative environmental and climate futures. While some scholars such as Urry (2011) and Featherstone (2013) rejected the post-politics theory through the analysis of the struggles of multiple climate activist movements aimed to re-politicize climate politics, Kenis (2019) has questioned this position by arguing the post-political condition of these initiatives. Indeed, she states that climate claims highlighted by diverse movements are adopted to reach different and concealed socio-political aims which can be said to be depoliticized. Therefore, this condition prevents the rise of *political* convergence spaces and challenges the effective repoliticization of environmental politics. In order to summarize these different manifestations of the *political*, we explored the debate on grassroots urban movements. Moreover, we discussed the rise of the *political* through climate and environmental claims, despite the recognition of issues stressed by Kenis (2019). This poses a fundamental question about the ontology of the political community, firstly in relation to the framework developed in the context of post-politics theory, secondly in reference to the empirical manifestation of such communities through urban and environmental claims.

As mentioned in the introduction, these accounts on the *political* are mostly based on an understanding of community grounded in post-foundational theory developed by Rancière, Badiou, Laclau and Mouffe (see also Mouffe, 1991). As also highlighted by Dikec (2005), for Rancière (1999) the disruption of the *police* order can emerge only through the construction of a common space, a place that allows “the emergence of a political articulation at a particular time and space” (Dikec, 2005) by means of an opposing logic. We further discuss Rancière’s conceptualization, specifically with reference to Hannah Arendt’s thinking. Here it is important to stress that for Rancière the rise of the *political* (that he actually names politics) is possible through the appropriation, the sharing, of a common and proper space to manifest dissensus. By establishing a place and the belonging to a place as a threshold for a new political community, we argue that Rancière re-assets the very same logic of political territoriality at the base of the modern state and, therefore, at the base of the logic of property.

More recently, looking at urban struggles in Rome and Dublin, Di Felicianantonio and O’Callaghan (2020) have likewise explored community through Rancierian thought, implemented by the perspective of Jean-Luc Nancy (1986). They claim that Nancy’s conception of community, interpreted as something that exists beyond identity and avoids any theological or political claims, can be compared to the concept of *political* developed by Rancière. However, as also Inston has shown (2020), Rancière does not consider community to be an ontological condition in the same way that Nancy does; rather, he sees it as an historically and spatially situated thing, experienced and developed through politics, as recalled above through Dikec (2005). This

understanding therefore runs the risk of explaining the *political* as an effort to rebuild an ideal community as something opposed to the society of individuals. This is the very idea underlying traditional communitarian thought and communicative theory – from Tönnies to Habermas – and it is this understanding that, as we will see, forms the point of departure for Esposito’s critique of the ontology of community (2010).

In fact, as also highlighted in the geographical debate by Popke (2003), Nancy’s conceptualization of ‘inoperative community’ is something always-in-progress and not an objective in need to be re-established. Along this path and developing Laclau’s conceptualization, Mouffe (2000) imagined the rise of an alternative political community as something against an external order and in a relation of antagonism. “Antagonism – states Machin (2013, p. 92) through Mouffe – exists between ‘us’ and ‘them’; the ‘us’ needs a ‘them’ to constitute itself as an identity”. This perspective, as further analyzed by Marchart (2007), is based on the recognition of a negation, of a lack of foundation, represented by the impossibility to define society in its totality – as Karl Marx had it – that means the impossibility to identify society “as the ground of social processes” (Marchart, 2007). Moving away both from a Kantian-liberal view and from a civic-communitarian one, Mouffe (1991) tried to develop an alternative and weaker idea of political community rejecting its foundation grounded on a common good, on an idea of commonality or on a bond between people. Derived from Carl Schmitt’s criterion of the distinction between friends and enemies, Mouffe’s proposition aimed at establishing a common political identity in a context of diversity and conflict:

The creation of political identities as radical democratic citizens depends, therefore, on a collective form of identification among the democratic demands found in a variety of movements [...] This is a conception of citizenship that through a common identification with a radical democratic interpretation of the principles of liberty and equality aims at constructing a ‘we’ (Mouffe, 1991)

Despite recognizing the radical value contained in this proposal, we argue that this intersubjective perspective runs somehow the risk to move away from developing Nancy’s inoperative, non-foundational community and therefore, by contributing to the debate between post-politics and community, our aim is to recall significant aspects of Esposito’s work so as to advance post-politics theory and contribute to a deeper understanding of the *political*, and its processes of fragmentation and re-organization in particular.

3. The political community in light of Esposito’s *communitas*

Esposito’s theorization (2010) evolves along the same theoretical path developed by Nancy (1986), also discussed by Popke (2003), specifically as an effort to separate the conception of community from the subject, that is, to contest the assumption that every community must be understood as the expansion of the subjective dimension. The subjectivation of community entails viewing it as closely caught up with property and belonging, something that originates from a *proprium* with which are associated a plurality of subjects. In contrast to this view, Esposito demonstrates that community is not established by the fact of sharing a good – property – but rather by assuming a *munus*, a duty, a sacrifice, a lack, as the etymology of the Latin word *communitas* (*cum munus*) suggests. Building upon Esposito, western political philosophy – from Empiricism to the Enlightenment – has tried to compensate for this gap to fill through subjectivation the void that community implies and to historically trace something that is outside of history. The consequence of this positioning affects every project seeking to establish community by expanding and homogenizing subjective individuality, attempts that inevitably lead to totalitarianism. Moreover, the compensation against the community entails the rise of an immunitary apparatus aimed at protecting the subjects both from possible external threats and from the internal violence which characterizes every human group (Esposito, 2011).

Esposito's rethinking of *communitas* begins from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Pure Reason* and specifically Kant's statement that any community bound to the finiteness of the subject is impossible. This recognition of contradiction allows for an ontological reconsideration of community itself:

That contradiction [...] says that declaring the impossibility of community is to be read in reverse: to say that the community is impossible means in fact that that impossibility is community. Community is the only one that men and women can experience if they accept its law: that of their finitude, which is to say, of community's impossibility. (Esposito, 2010: 76–77).

However, the impossibility stressed in Esposito's arguments brings about a shift, away from interpretations of Kant's political thinking which – beginning with Arendt (1982) – are based on the aesthetic conceptualization expressed in *Critique of Judgement*. According to these latter lines of thought, the sphere of judgment has a substantial universal and communicative character founded on a presumed common sense, and it is this character that makes it possible to conceive of a heterogeneous community, avoiding any organicist or voluntarist semantics. In our opinion, the critique that Esposito puts forward with regard to Arendt's interpretation is also effective to re-discuss Rancière's understandings of the political community. In fact, as underlined by Dikec (2012), Arendt's interpretation is also taken up by Rancière when he engages the idea of aesthetics as *le partage du sensible* (the partition of the sensible), an approach that evokes two postulations of Kant's *Critique*: on one hand, the form of what is perceived by the senses and, on the other hand, the act of interpreting aesthetic judgment as something that is shared, founded on the double meaning of the French word *partage* as both 'separating' and 'sharing'. This distribution therefore becomes something that separates and excludes, but also something – as Dikec stresses – that is pooled in common and shared among the community:

The partition of the sensible is a contingent distribution of forms that structure common - though not consensual - experience, marked by tension and conflict» (Dikec, 2012: 270).

In this sense, community arises as something that is historically and geographically situated and that connects up people's experience. Moreover, it refers to:

what is commonly made available to the senses and made to make sense - 'the frame', as it were, that conditions our forms of perceiving the world and modes of relating to it (Dikec, 2012: 274).

Partially in contrast to this view, Mouffe (2000) argued that the emergence of a political identity and, therefore, of a political community takes place in the form of a 'constitutive outside', thus setting a strong opposition between an inside and an outside that gives rise to the political antagonism (see also Richter, 2019). We then suggest that in these post-foundational accounts the community emerges as a 'we', as the subject of the aesthetic sphere – the same one postulated by Arendt – which gives rise to a form of communicability through which, it seems, communitarian discourse can be established: discourse that is neither simply objective nor subjective, but apparently fully intersubjective. Again, drawing on Esposito, this line of thought that builds on a presumed intersubjectivity to reveal the possibility of community, develops parallel to the subjective theories formulated in the tradition of European political philosophy. It develops in parallel because, as we have seen, according to Esposito's view the community must be investigated by setting off from the limits of the subject as determined by Kantian law. As stressed above, this law speaks of an impossibility through which people are connected in community. This impossibility should not be understood as something 'whole' that we have in common, but as a 'non-thing, a 'nothing-in-common' (Esposito, 2010). The issue of the 'non-thing' consequently affects the problem of nihilism. Esposito frames nihilism as neither something finite nor something to which the presumed fullness of the community can be in some way opposed, as

claimed by communitarian thinking. The only way to transcend the nihilist tendency of modern society, therefore, is to abandon the dichotomous opposition between nihilism and community and to embrace both conceptions as part of a way of thinking in which the 'non-thing' represents an opportunity for re-thinking the ontology of community beyond the limits of the subject:

In brief, no-thing isn't the condition or the result of community [...] but rather is community's only mode of being. In other words, community isn't incapacitated, obscured, or hidden by no-thing but instead is constituted by it. This means simply that community isn't an entity, nor is it a collective subject, nor a totality of subjects, but rather is the relation that makes them no longer individual subjects because it closes them off from their identity with a line, which traversing them, alters them: it is the "with", the "between", and the threshold where they meet in a point of contact that brings them into relation with others to the degree to which it separates them from themselves. (Esposito, 2010: 139).

In synthesis, Esposito posits a firm juxtaposition between the *proprium* – the proper, as something acquired through a political process of immunization that destroys the community, and what is improper, ontological and impolitical, as the very essence of *communitas*. Even Rancière's conceptualization of *police* and *political* (named politics by Rancière) is based on distinguishing between proper and improper, with the *police* conceived of as the power to control propriety and establish a hierarchy of roles and positions to maintain a particular social order and guarantee the right of property. The *political*, on the contrary, is thus cast as an improper community, an egalitarian space through which to enact – as noted above – the distribution of the sensible, the dual process of partitioning and sharing (Rancière, 1999, see also Panagia, 2018). Inston (2020) also references this dichotomy between proper and improper in his recent work where he draws a parallel between Esposito and Rancière, seeking to empower both their positions. Inston proceeds to argue that Esposito's philosophy is not actually capable of acting in practice, suggesting that it has reached an impasse. He then supplements Esposito's idea of *communitas* by bringing in Rancière's notion of improper community in an effort to connect an ontological understanding of community to the aim of studying politics and community in history, as Rancière does. Inston comes to the conclusion that Rancière's political – through the idea of improper community – represents an effort to fulfill the purpose of community, as the *political* is the arrival point that assumes something in common, in opposition to the proprietary logic of the police:

Improper communities reveal, expand and revitalize community by creating new spheres of common experience, by demonstrating to others their equal capacity to make themselves count, by revealing a shared world between members and non-members (Inston, 2020: 637).

In our opinion, this statement does not match the main pillars of Esposito's thought, however; for Esposito, community is neither the product of something nor an arrival point, but rather an ontological condition. In this sense and in opposition to Rancière's stance, it is also significant how Esposito makes use of the word *partizione* (partition) in connection with community, stressing the parallel semantics of *partizione* and *partenza* (departure, beginning):

the community is never a point of arrival but always one of departure [*di partenza*]. Indeed, it is the departure itself toward that which doesn't belong to us and can never belong to us. (Esposito, 2010: 140).

Therefore, building on Esposito's contribution in dialogue with post-politics and the *political*, we aim to reflect on the relational and social nature of *communitas* by exploring contemporary politics in Bologna and the realm of grassroots socio-environmental movements. This arena of action has arisen over the last two decades as a heterogeneous space

of disagreement and contestation aimed at fostering radical thinking and political transformation through a variety of practices.

4. Politics, conflict and the political: the case of Bologna

4.1. A methodological overview

In order to deal with the analysis of conflicting relations between governance institutional politics and urban socio-environmental movements in Bologna in an empirically grounded way, we adopted ethnographic methods, characterized by an action-research perspective, which include participatory observation, semi-structured interviews and informal dialogues (Hay, 2016); ethnography was combined with policy and discourse analysis (Wetherell et al., 2001). To grasp institutional governance politics and related processes at stake, we adopted policy analysis of an extensive range of urban planning documents, booklets on urban regeneration visions and of urban master plans promoted and formalized over the last two decades. We focused on the critical analysis of policy-making processes, their discourses and, especially, of participatory mechanisms embedded in urban regeneration processes. In order to understand in-depth institutional governance mechanisms, firstly we took part in meetings, projects presentations and debates promoted by city institutions since 2019. Secondly, we had formal academic conversations, combined with semi-structured interviews, with the director, two project managers of the *Fondazione per l'Innovazione Urbana* (FIU) (Foundation for urban innovation) and the former councilor for city planning. These combined methods enabled us to reflect on the hybrid political-academic nature of this institution and the rationale of policy and discourse. Furthermore, in collaboration with the *Pensare Urbano* (Urban Thinking) grassroots laboratory, we created a multidisciplinary working group for the analysis of the Piano Urbanistico Generale (PUG) (Urban General Plan) which involved three academics, five master students in social sciences and five activists of the laboratory. The working group conducted discourse analysis together with urbanistic and territorial analysis of the PUG aimed at contributing to the “PUG participatory analysis initiative” promoted by the Bologna city council. These methods and activities enabled an in-depth analysis of today's urban governance politics as well as its evolution over recent years.

In order to deal with the analysis of urban struggles and reflect on the political, we engaged in multi-case-study ethnographic research of the four most significant examples of squatted social centers (*centro sociale occupato*) which have emerged in Bologna over the last twenty five years: namely *TPO*, *Labas*, *Crash!* and *XM 24*. In Italian, the term *centro sociale occupato* refers to squatted buildings which host non-institutionalized socio-political movements and their socio-political and cultural activities but usually exclude housing practices. With regard to recent environmental struggles, we focus on two grassroots mobilizations, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* and *Rete delle Lotte Ambientali Bolognesi* since they play today a strategic role in environmental and climate politics and represent, as we will discuss, a potential example of political community. We collected data on grassroots movements, their histories and mutual relations firstly through a literature review encompassing a variety of formal and informal documents, reports, press statements and newspaper articles. Secondly, through 30 semi-structured interviews, conducted from 2020 to 2022, to activists who play and have played a significant role in selected movements as well as in Bologna political debate. Before conducting interviews we shared with activists the aim of our empirical research as well as the theoretical background that drove our reflection. Furthermore, over the last three years, we invited activists to take part in academic workshops, seminars and teaching labs on urban governance and grassroots social struggles. Thirdly, we carried out action research with grassroots movements entailing participation in rallies and demonstrations, participatory observation and discussion in assemblies and seminars, as well as informal talks and dialogues with different participants and activists in various contexts. Moreover, over the last years we have been

invited by members of grassroots movements, as well as by student activists, to take part in public seminars and laboratories on urban politics, socio-environmental conflicts and political ecology. The combination of policy analysis and semi-structured interviews with our experiences and involvement in activities and practices of grassroots movements was important to thoroughly understand their legacy, mutual relations and struggles. For practical and ethical reasons, information collected during our involvement and activities with movements represented the general background knowledge for our research, while data collected during semi-structured interviews together with academic and teaching activities provided the most significant data on which we focused our analytical attention.

4.2. Politics and the neutralization of dissent: neo-liberal urban governance in Bologna

Although Bologna is not a major city, it represents a specific case study in the Italian and European context. For decades, the city was held up as an example of progressive politics due to its social democracy inspired by socialist principles, welfare networks and citizen participation in urban planning. Even international literature attests to the significance of the Bologna case, recognizing the city as an effective model of the *via emiliana* to socialism¹ (Jouve & Lefevre, 1997).

However, since the mid-1980s and, in particular, with the new urban master plan of 1985, a significant socio-political reconfiguration has affected the city government. New visions inspired by the concept of urban renewal and oriented towards attracting private investment and involving private actors in decision-making processes have become the key ingredients of urban planning. Moreover, the reductions of the role of the public sector significantly weakened welfare services. The progressive neoliberalization of urban politics led to the rise of various antagonistic social groups and movements which organized the occupation of abandoned post-industrial sites, squatting, and informal social practices. In the following decades the Bologna city council has further implemented governance mechanisms, especially through technocratic instruments and mechanisms of social inclusion and participation, gradually generating heterogeneous dynamics of touristification and gentrification (Sprega et al., 2018). This significant political transformation in Bologna urban politics, emerged since the late 1980s and consolidated over the last three decades, could be understood as the rise of a post-politics framework characterized by politics that envisioned the institutional support of technocratic mechanisms, controversial participatory instruments and the progressive marginalization of dissent.

Indeed, the city council greeted these socio-economic reconfigurations as a success. In reality, they exacerbated urban asymmetries, spatial inequalities and marginalization. As a result, Bologna locals began to launch conflicting claims for socio-spatial justice in opposition to urban regeneration processes and related controversial initiatives fueled by public-private partnerships (Zinzani & Curzi, 2020). In an effort to deal with this context of contestation, the city council decided to consolidate urban governance by setting up new institutions and horizontal participatory mechanisms designed to involve citizens in urban and neighborhood-level decision-making processes. Since 2014, the city council has organized various initiatives, with the aim of creating arenas in which citizens and associations can interact with urban planners so as to foster the participatory governance of urban spaces. These governance policies, discourses and practices therefore represent a key example of contemporary politics despite their intended aim of facilitating governance, they have actually served to revive political debate and disagreement led by various social movements. In

¹ The notion of the “Emilian way to socialism” meant a development pathway rooted in Emilia-Romagna leftist politics since the 1950s-60s, guided by the regional branch of the Partito Comunista Italiano, and characterized by social democracy, welfare networks and citizen participation in urban planning.

order to deal with these processes and, more specifically, strengthen the city's dialogue with groups making claims and expressing dissent, in 2018 the city council and local banking foundations created the *Fondazione per l'Innovazione Urbana*. The new institution is positioned at the crossroads of urban sustainability, urban and digital democracy, and innovative urban welfare through the key support of the University of Bologna. Within this framework, the *Fondazione* seeks to consolidate its role as the collective brain of urban transformations through horizontal knowledge-sharing between citizens, institutions, and economic actors. Furthermore, it supports efforts to valorize urban culture and specifically the co-production of collective urban imaginaries oriented towards caring for and reviving urban commons through citizens' active participation. Indeed, it is important to highlight that the *Fondazione* has often stressed the collaborative relations between Bologna and Barcelona in terms of a shared commitment towards progressive urban commoning practices and the participatory co-production of urban politics. In order to emphasize this collaboration, the city council invited Ada Colau in Bologna for the official launch of the *Fondazione* and for a public seminar on the future of European urban politics. Reflecting on the notion of *politics*, the role of the *Fondazione* in particular enables us to understand how a new institution established to serve as a bridge between the vision of institutional politics and the technical, scientific discourse of the university has strategically consolidated a new, collective urban identity while simultaneously marginalizing and neutralizing disagreement. The strategy involves firstly the organization of participatory processes, collective assemblies, informative seminars and public events on urban politics and science aimed at highlighting its inclusive and progressive perspective. Secondly, granting local groups the temporary use of abandoned urban sites under collaborative agreements with the concealed intention of reducing disagreement. Indeed, the *Fondazione* has been quick to take on the ideas and claims expressed by associations and socio-environmental movements and to involve critical social scientists and activists in its initiatives so as to emphasize the progressive, radical and bottom-up nature of Bologna's *politics* and reduce disagreement. Furthermore, as we show in the next section, the *Fondazione* has been able to cut down on occupation and squatting and enter into collaborative agreements with various antagonistic and radical movements. In so doing, the new institution has managed to weaken heterogeneous spaces of dissent and cause them to fragment along fault lines of political position, claims and practices, thereby neutralizing conflict to some extent.

4.3. The rise of the political and its fragmentation: TPO, Labas, Crash, and XM24

As briefly introduced in the previous section, Bologna has a long tradition of grassroots radical movements, cultural associations, and independent media dating back to the 1968 student movement. In this context, our analysis focuses on spaces and movements that have been developed since the late 1990s, together with the post-industrial and neoliberal transformation characterizing the city post-communist transition. These grassroots initiatives developed in an effort to fill the gaps generated by such transformations, both physical gaps in the sense of empty spaces left by the dismantling of factories and gaps in terms of claims and contestation due to neoliberal policies' progressive marginalization of dissent. Therefore, we examine four *occupied social centers* that developed and took over abandoned urban spaces as examples of grassroots movements aimed at claiming a wide spectrum of social rights and asserting principles of socio-spatial justice and, at the same time, as creative hubs fostering alternative cultural initiatives. Following the theoretical and empirical reflection of Dikec and Swyngedouw (2017), and Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014), among others, on diverse examples of urban *political* initiatives, we therefore conceptualize these four grassroots experiences as the rise of the *political* in Bologna. This condition is due to their radical contestation of *politics*, practices of antagonism, heterogeneous spaces of dissent inspired by

principles of solidarity and democratic and their orientation towards the re-politicization and democratization of urban political processes. We also reflect in depth on the fragmentation of the *political* and, in the next section, on its consequent today's reorganization through contemporary environmental-climate struggles, following Esposito's conceptualization of the *communitas*. With regard to grassroots movements' political roots and legacy, these four initiatives are bound to the heterogeneous context of the Italian extra-parliamentary radical left characterized by different perspectives ranging from autonomist Marxism and communism to anarchism. Furthermore, their political struggles have been influenced by late 1990s alter globalist and anti-neoliberal claims. *TPO*, its offshoot *Labas* as well as *Crash* are closer to the legacy of autonomist Marxism; whereas *TPO* and *Labas* are related to the network of *Disobbedienti*, *Crash* embodies a more autonomous position with regard to relations with institutions. *XM24* was rooted in the libertarianist tradition and includes diverse and heterogeneous perspectives such as trade unionism, anarchism and radical Marxism. All of these groups have come into conflict with public institutions: they have been evicted from their squatted sites, put on trial and convicted of crimes. In view of these clashes with the authorities, we also consider how the local government, and the *Fondazione per l'Innovazione Urbana* in particular, has developed certain *politics* instruments to combat these groups and their activities, either by trying to eradicate them or, more commonly, trying to domesticate them and assimilate them into a pacified urban landscape. As we will discuss, these *politics* strategy has been successful in the progressive weakening of the *political* and its subsequent fragmentation.

The oldest of grassroots initiatives is *Teatro Polivalente Occupato (TPO)*, a squat founded in 1995 and still active today. It was established with the occupation of an abandoned theatre located in the city center. As stated by an activist involved in *TPO* since its establishment, the initiative was organized by *Radio K popolare*, an independent broadcasting station, and other cultural groups such as the *Gruppo situazionistico Luther Blissett*, a very well-pseudonym that has spread well beyond Bologna and been adopted by artists and activists all around Europe (*TPO* activist). However, the first eviction by the police occurred already in 2000 and the group was pushed to occupy another space, an abandoned fish tank factory in the inner suburbs that they held until 2007. In contrast to several other squats of that period that simply appeared and disappeared, *TPO* weathered a series of occupations and evictions to constitute a social laboratory that was well-rooted in the urban fabric. Given this more well-rooted status, the municipal government was obliged to negotiate with the organizations engaged in animating the cultural and political life of the occupied space. In 2004, the city council signed a formal agreement that then took effect in 2007 in which the organizations were assigned a space – an abandoned, renovated warehouse owned by the national railway company and rented to the city – provided they pay rent on an annual basis. Two activists involved in the negotiations with the city council highlighted that despite some controversial discussions with its representatives, the agreement was reconfirmed in 2018 to remain in effect until 2022 (*TPO* activist). By reflecting on the negotiations between the city council and *TPO*, it is possible to state that institutions, through the formalization of a collaborative agreement, were able to cut down occupation, weaken dissent and neutralize conflict.

Similar processes occurred in relation to the political initiative *Labas* which began as an offshoot of *TPO* in the summer of 2012, having grown out of a discussion group focused on issues of precariousness in short-term employment, rising awareness about the invisibility of certain subjects such as young workers and migrants not entitled to welfare. A member of *TPO*, involved in the discussion group that led to the experience of *Labas*, argued that this initiative was also fueled by the awareness that the city center lacked spaces for social gatherings and political activities because of the above-mentioned public policies. Participants and activists thus occupied a former military compound in the historical city center that urban planning has slated for renovation as a luxury hotel and high-class residential complex. The police first

evicted the occupants in late 2012, then they re-occupied the building in February of 2013 and held it until the final, violent eviction in the summer of 2017. In its almost five years of existence, however, *Labas* developed several welfare initiatives and neighborhood projects such as a migrant support and integration desk and an informal kindergarten, as well as cultural activities, thus gaining a solid foothold in the neighborhood and city more generally that granted it political clout and growing media coverage. A student activist of *Labas* stressed that the unexpected violent eviction was strongly criticized by the inhabitants of the neighborhood as well as by many citizens of Bologna who expressed solidarity through their participation in the *Riapriamo Labas* rally which involved more than 10000 people (*Labas* student activist). As a result, the local government was pressed to sign an agreement assigning the group a public space where it could continue with its activities. In the meantime, the regional and municipal institutions had refined a set of technocratic governance instruments focused on public participation – especially in relation to the management of urban commons – through a number of laws and regulations, implementing a post-political discourse “with the aim of building consensus among active citizens on the most visible aspect of the urban question, and of de-fragmenting and ‘de-multiplying’ the more antagonistic claims for participation” (Bianchi, 2018). It emerged in a collective discussion in the framework of an academic lab that, thanks to one of these participatory mechanisms, *Labas* was able to participate in a call for applications, launched by the city, to take on the management of a public building. *Labas* won this competitive application process in 2018 and thus secured a new location in the city center to relaunch its cultural and political activity.

Such urban governance tools for dealing with dissent were also used to resolve conflict with another political group, *Laboratorio Crash*. This initiative was born in 2003 with the occupation of an abandoned building at the northern edge of the city. Over the course of two decades, *Crash* was evicted from and subsequently re-occupied a series of abandoned buildings indifferent Bologna neighborhoods. An activist claimed that, despite its troubled trajectory, the group was able to undertake several initiatives, particularly related with the right to housing and the issues of student movements (*Crash* activist). As mentioned above, in recent years the *Fondazione per l’Innovazione Urbana* has taken on a growing role in managing urban politics and developing governance instruments in Bologna. In 2018 it launched a project called *Laboratorio spazi*, another participatory process for giving social/civic entities unused public spaces and experimenting with new methods for managing the commons. Viewed from a critical perspective, this participatory tool displays the same weaknesses or problematic aspects that Bianchi (2018) identified in previous such tools, specifically the tendency to construct a compelling narrative that disguises the biases, conflicts of interest and technocratic and top-down processes characterizing it. As had occurred with *Labas*, some members of *Crash* were able to take part in this controversial process and thereby obtain the lease for a building, an extremely rundown former dairy in the far north suburbs that the organization was supposed to renovate via crowdfunding.

The fourth example of a grassroots movement is *XM24*, a political entity created in 2002 as an offshoot of the *Bologna Social Forum* hosted in a building that had once been a wholesale fruit and vegetable market. Unlike the other groups presented here, *XM24* did not start with an occupation; rather Bologna’s mayor officially granted the group this building. The concession was renewed by the city council in 2013 for a period of three years and, when this agreement expired in 2016, the city ordered the organization to vacate the building. What came next was a trying process of mediation between activists and local authorities, with the city trying to involve the political group in official participatory processes and public initiatives for the lease of spaces and buildings. Although *XM24* was well integrated into the fabric of the neighborhood, however, it was skeptical of the city’s logics of urban regeneration and subsidiarity. Activists were concerned that the kind of institutionalization proposed by city officials would lead to negative consequences in terms of disempowering the political nature and claims of the

organization. As had occurred two years earlier with *Labas*, as the expected eviction date approached, *XM24* organized a rally in the city center involving a vast mobilization of people. Despite the mediatic impact of this demonstration, the mediation failed and the building was definitively cleared by the police in the summer of 2019. An activist part of *XM24* since its establishment, stated that from the beginning of the mediation attempt, the city was not actually interested in finding a solution; he argues that its real aim was to quickly conclude the process of mediation and proceed with eviction, a move that ended up also putting an end to the group’s existence (*XM24* activist).

At first glance, our overview might suggest that these cases represent success stories in which certain grassroots movements as examples of the *political* have been able to deal with and resist the post-democratic order pursued through the neoliberal policies and technocratic instruments of the *politics*. Viewed from this perspective, it might seem that *XM24* was ultimately unsuccessful only because the group was unable to engage in a political context and debate with urban institutions. However, there are two further issues to consider in relation to the fragmentation of the *political* and Esposito’s conceptualization of *communitas*, issues that we explore more fully in the next section: First, could the controversial nature of the city’s governance instruments described above have somehow conditioned the socio-spatial construction of these institutionalized entities? Second, in relation to the reflection on *communitas*, how could these grassroots political initiatives be interpreted by reflecting on their political nature as groups of individuals with their own internal hierarchies, their fragmentation and fault lines as well as their positioning in the wider political context of the city as a whole? What does their common subjectivity represent, if we also consider how and whether this subjective dimension can effectively produce an egalitarian space of action, thereby challenging the proprietarian logic of *politics*?

5. *Communitas* and the *political* in dialogue

5.1. *The crisis of political communities: governance instruments, spaces of identity and exclusive subjectivities*

Today, the four grassroots political movements we analyzed in Bologna are able to survive if they are conditioned by negotiations and the establishment of some form of official agreement with the city council. On the contrary, the initiative which the city was not able to institutionalize was inevitably condemned to disappear. As several studies on the institutionalization of urban movements have shown (Nicholls & Uitermark, 2016; Pruijt, 2003), stabilizing these radical entities through rules and regulations almost inevitably causes them to lose their disruptive character. Moreover, one outcome of formalizing such spaces of dissent is that their political-spatial action ends up being incorporated into the planning of urban regeneration. They are thus transformed into pacified spaces that serve to provide services and consumption opportunities for the service class and contribute to the consolidation of a neo-liberal creative city. As critical analyses of urban governance in Bologna have already stressed (Bianchi, 2018), the city – and, more recently the hybrid techno-political entity represented by the *Fondazione per l’Innovazione Urbana* – do not necessarily put their horizontal and inclusive rhetoric into action. Rather, they act as manipulators, selecting and privileging certain social actors and organizations. Besides grassroots political and cultural associations, moreover, these participatory mechanisms have involved and brought together other third-sector and well-consolidated actors and organizations with considerable organizational resources and extensive political networks at the local and even national levels such as *ARCI*, the biggest Italian cultural association. For instance, *Crash* could obtain from the city council the leasing of a public building through a participatory process aimed at locating empty public spaces to formal associations in order to foster third sector business and related social and cultural activities. Through our empirical research we found that some third sector

associations involved in these processes did not consider problematic the political nature of these participatory mechanisms (*ARCI* activist). While, as emerged in an interview, *Crash* had to reconfigure its informal status into a formal association in order to get involved in the process thus, concealing its autonomist legacy (*Crash* activist).

There have been several distinctive outcomes. First, the most conflictual and problematic subjects have been excluded, while actors and networks that lack a solid organizational structure have been marginalized. Second, the radical subjects that are involved in these participatory processes end up being normalized and domesticated through not only administrative rules but also the tendency to merge, in pacificated spaces, the action of these radical entities with that of other, less politically radical and already normalized subjects and organizations. Third, public spaces are managed in a manner disguised as inclusive, accessible, and open to the citizenry while in reality seeking to remake such spaces through cultural, creative, and de-politicized processes and, in so doing, facilitate the capitalist exploitation of the urban commons (see also Enright & Rossi, 2018).

To discuss the nature of the four grassroots movements in relation to the *political* and the Esposito's *communitas* and respond to the last two questions posed at the end of the previous section, we can lay out some further key observations. As suggested by the historical analysis of these initiatives over the last 20–25 years, these movements are quite fragmented, mainly due to different and divergent socio-political roots that continue to reflect the 20th-century political dialectic. As a result of these divergent frameworks, the fragmented entities are unable to come together and form a common convergence space to challenge the proprietary logic of *politics*. What political convergence participants manage to achieve among the different groups is merely a matter of numbers and does not offer the grounds for solid, long-lasting initiatives. Beyond ideological divergences, the fragmentation between groups also stems from the nature of such political movements in that they emerge and are constructed in specific, confined spaces. Scholarship in critical geographies of occupation and urban social movements states that practices of occupation are strategic “to constitute the common(s) as a point of departure for rethinking how we come to think about and inhabit the city” (Vasudevan, 2015). Following this perspective in the Italian context, focusing on urban housing occupation in Rome, Caciagli (2019) has recently argued that house squatting represents a strategy to develop political collective subjects which can trigger radical political transformations. However, by reflecting on the theoretical roots at the base of these analyses, we argue that these scholars' interpretation of the appropriation and sharing of space develops parallel to Ranciere and Mouffe theoretical perspectives. Therefore, our analysis shows that the retreat of grassroots movements back into these spaces to develop their projects and activities is problematic, because this acts again as an effort to build a proper, essential community, something that also determines the rise of an immunitary apparatus with its identitarian, exclusive dimension, its partitioning and closure to the outside (see also Esposito, 2011). In fact, as a consequence of such retreat, activists tend to develop a spatial identity that is founded on the common appropriation and management of such a space, a space which must then be filled with something shared by the members of the supposed improper community. The key role of a proper space as the ground for the political community was highlighted by an activist of *Labas* who pointed out:

“Each grassroots movement needs its own space to enable them to converge with the others and create a common political project” (*Labas* activist).

Although this space is built as a container of practices for non-commodified confrontation and in opposition to any proprietary logic, the groups' ties to a specific space inevitably lead to an exclusive community based on individual subjectivities and the expansion of these subjectivities, as highlighted in Esposito's theoretical framework: community as an arrival point with little inclination to open itself up to exchange or share its political initiatives and decision-making processes.

By focusing on the experience of *XM24*, an activist argued:

“The essence of this initiative was based on a space as the container of non-commodified practices; indeed, *XM24*, until its eviction, was an autonomous hub of social relations alternative to other existing places. For us the assembly, and related practices, was central to preserve this space, an attitude that you could consider as post-political” (*XM24* activist)

In this fragmented landscape, the logic of *politics* takes shape and acts through processes of institutionalization along with techniques and tactics to further disempower the movements' political capacity. On one hand, movements are disempowered as a result of the spread of a depoliticized idea of urban regeneration and subsidiarity mechanisms that shape and condition the activities of the political subjects involved. On the other hand, by promoting participatory processes that trigger a kind of internal competition between the actors involved, *politics* produces an aestheticization of the conflict in a domesticated and depoliticized way. As we have seen, the buildings and spaces granted or confiscated by the city represent the grounds on which the movements construct their political community; as such, they serve as the lynchpin of the political dialectic. If deprived of such spaces, the grassroots movements are robbed of their political capacity. And without such spaces, public institutions also become less interested in dialoguing with grassroots political movements. As an *XM24* activist stated:

“The loss of our space also represented the impossibility to have a bargaining position in the negotiations with the city council and therefore the end of our political experience” (*XM24* activist).

5.2. Reconstructing political community through environmental claims? Bologna's environmental struggles network

The previous section explored the complex processes of fragmentation of the *political* in terms of disempowerment, spaces, practices and negotiations with the realm of *politics* that have characterized Bologna in recent years. As discussed in depth and in line with Esposito's critical perspective of community, the political initiatives analyzed above reveal an intrinsic fragility, diverging interests and progressively more exclusive and individual subjectivities. If we reflect on the contemporary political landscape resulting from the fragmentation and institutionalization of the *political* as well as the newly post-pandemic scenario, how might we imagine new grassroots *political* urban futures that transcend this fragmentation? Could a *political* community be reconstructed through a *munus*, in the sense of the point of departure and act of overcoming individual subjectivity highlighted by Esposito? Building on the insights in critical geography provided by Kenis and Lievens (2014), North et al. (2017), and Aiken (2017), could environmental claims produce and advance a *political* community in the contemporary setting of global eco-climate crisis? Looking at the case of Bologna, and especially at the *Rete Lotte Ambientali Bolognese (ReLoab)* that we discuss below, we can see that the ecological nature of urban spaces, and environmental issues more generally, have recently gained a progressively key role in grassroots political mobilization. This stems from a rising awareness of the global ecological crisis in relation to climate change and popular debate on our contemporary lives in the Anthropocene. Indeed, over the last few years, the global eco-climate crisis and related issues have progressively shaped and revitalized the political claims of grassroots movements we analyzed, also in relation to the increasing contestation emerging between part of the civil society and the Bologna city government around urban socio-natures governance. In this context, discussions over how to manage and preserve the *Prati di Caprara* urban forest became highly contested due to the efforts of the civic committee *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*. Since 2018, this conflict has provided a strategic opportunity for holding a collective discussion on the ecological dimension of the city, and re-asserting claims advanced in common by various grassroots initiatives. The *Prati di*

Caprara forest, located close to the city center, developed over time as a result of renaturalization in a vast, 47-ha ex-military site that was abandoned in the early 1980s. In 2016, the city government launched an urban redevelopment project to construct residential and commercial spaces in this area, a plan that would have involved removing the majority of the forest. The following year, the group *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* established by citizens of the neighborhood began to demand that the forest be preserved, highlighting its role in biodiversity conservation and arguing that it constitutes an urban common, emphasizing its public character in the face of privatization (Zinzani & Curzi, 2020). In addition, as emerged through dialogues with committee activists, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* has stressed the need to re-democratize urban politics through effective public participation in decision-making processes and grassroots governance, in contrast to urban redevelopment that is managed from the top down (*Rigenerazione No Speculazione* activist). By reflecting on the role of *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, it is important to point out that the citizens committee was able to open up a space of exposure on environmental mobilization without claiming its exclusive leading condition, a logic of the *proprium* around which building a community. Indeed, this space of exposure could be read, following Esposito's perspective, as a point of departure towards broader claims related to global environmental and climate justice. Over the last three years, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* has managed to raise awareness about *Prati di Caprara* through various grassroots practices such as involving citizens, staging visits to the site, and organizing participatory activities, seminars and rallies. In doing so it has secured the support of social and environmental associations as well as local political parties. Indeed, beyond the fragmentation described above, grassroots social movements such as *Labas*, *TPO*, *Crash* and the groups making up the former *XM24* have increased their cooperation in pushing for the preservation of *Prati di Caprara* and environmental struggles more broadly. By adopting formal institutional mechanisms to call city council politics and initiatives into question, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione*, together with various other actors, has been able to shape the vision and political discourse of the city government, succeeding in reopening discussion about the urban development project and temporarily stopping it from being implemented (Trentanovi et al., 2021). In parallel, the group advanced different visions for the future of the area, visions to be achieved through grassroots participation and community governance. In 2019, another committee called *Ex Caserma Mazzoni Bene Comune* was established to oppose the urban redevelopment of an abandoned military site and preserve its rewilded spaces from a plan to construct new residential and commercial buildings. Thanks to the two committees' socio-environmental struggles, the issue of the ecological character of urban spaces in relation to the global eco-climate crisis acquired more visibility in political debate, strengthening existing relations with Bologna social justice and environmental associations and granting more attention to environmental and climate justice claims. The committees, together with local associations, created new synergies and channels of exchange and discussion with the grassroots movements analyzed above, as emerged during an open seminar with members of *Rigenerazione*, *Labas* and *TPO*. Indeed, different members of *Labas* and *TPO* have been already playing an active role in supporting *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* rallies and scientific activities since 2018 and they have been committed in strengthening contacts and relations between these different experiences. In fall 2020 *Labas* together with fourteen committees, associations and movements organized a public assembly and, two months later, a street parade that gave rise to a network called *Rete Lotte Ambientali Bolognesi (ReLoAB)*. Based on the sharing of environmental justice demands and nurtured by the engagement of different actors and socio-environmental associations, this environmental struggle network prepared a specific operative plan for designing guidelines and coordinating practices and strategies with the key aim of building radical urban futures and fostering an environmental revolution. In May 2021 these efforts were formalized in a manifesto as well as the planning text

Piano per una rivoluzione ambientale a Bologna. The manifesto enables the understanding that this initiative represents the initial outcome of a path of collective convergence between diverse movements and associations that, as we will discuss, foresees a sacrifice. Indeed, the *Piano* presents *ReLoAB* as a collective space animated by the experiences of fourteen different associations committed to socio-environmental justice and lays out twelve strategic objectives to overturn decision-making processes and formulate progressive and just urban environmental politics. Reflecting on this experience and related ongoing processes, the *ReLoAB* could be said to represent a project of progressively building *communitas* as conceptualized by Esposito in the sense of going beyond the dimension of a single entity or of a collective subject of single individuals. First, this new relation seeks to definitively transcend the kind of tensions and fragmentation that have characterized the *political* in Bologna for the last two decades. Indeed, with regard to relational dynamics, the *ReLoAB* has been assembled through an assembly that includes representatives of fourteen associations and its decision-making processes take place through an horizontal assembly regime. Second, it grows out of a very heterogeneous array of different groups and organizations that have put aside a part of their essence, together with political roots and identity, to instead focus on the task of constituting a point of departure, a new ontological condition: this new condition, able to leave behind fragmentation, exclusive and individual subjectivities, according to our reflection represents the sacrifice, the act of expropriation, that enables the understanding of a *communitas* as conceptualized by Esposito, for whom the being of community has to be understood:

“Not as a pure potentiality to come nor as a law that is placed before our being there, but as the very being there in its *singularly plural* constitution” (Esposito, 2010).

Third, *ReLoAB* as a new ontological condition seeks to shape and reconfigure city governmental politics in the direction of redefining socio-environmental relations by highlighting how crucial it is to advance a new ontology based on the mutual interdependence of justice, human and non-human natures. A new ontology aimed to advance a radical rebalance of bargaining power relations in urban environmental politics towards an environmental revolution that makes the city livable, democratic and really sustainable.

6. Conclusion

As demonstrated by the analysis of cases in Bologna, some expressions of *political* communities inevitably tend toward a form of subjection that – adopting Esposito's (2010) argument – reiterates the barriers, the thresholds, that separate individuals from each other. The focus on sharing a space, i.e. setting up as a common good a space into which the community retreats and which become the goal of its existence, exemplifies Esposito's critique of communitarian thinking. While *political* action can sometimes disrupt the form of order *politics* seeks to impose, it often leads to the resurgence of the same proprietarian logic it allegedly opposes because of the interdependence between capitalist social production and the social forces that make this production possible. In our analysis, we have demonstrated that, on one hand, this proprietarian logic is at the foundation of governance mechanisms that stage simulated exercises in citizen participation to commodify public spaces and enact market-oriented urban renewal. On the other hand, this logic is also embedded in grassroots movements when they build their identities by setting up a shared but delimited space that ends up forming the true foundation of these very individualistic communities, losing sight of the larger city and world.

On the contrary, we have deployed Esposito's theorization of *communitas* in an attempt to shift and advance understandings of the *political* as a point of departure, something that grows out of the act of stripping individuals and grassroots initiatives of their subjective dimension by sharing a *munus*, a claim made in relation to Bologna's grassroots context that goes beyond any individualistically based community to

embrace a broader array of collective struggles. Although we understand Kenis' (2019) perspective on the post-political condition of climate change politics and certain environmental movements claims, our analysis enables us to argue that, over the last few years, *Rigenerazione No Speculazione* has been able to advance a socio-environmental claim and could overcome the political fragmentation characterizing grass-roots movements in Bologna. This process was possible by sharing a common struggle and a set of knowledge, without aiming at building a proper space, but succeeding in the re-politicization of Bologna politics mechanisms through a wider perspective connected with global eco-climate crisis issues. The commitment and struggles of *Rigenerazione*, strengthened and consolidated by the convergence with grass-roots movements, gave rise to *ReLoAB*, as discussed in the previous section. The example of *ReLoAB* suggests that environmental and climate justice struggles could represent a novel *munus* which must necessarily transcend previous experiences, moving beyond individual subjectivization, identities, and spaces to allow for the growth of new *communitas*. Recalling Esposito (2010), we argue that *ReLoAB* can represent an example of community, which overcomes individual life beyond its limits and towards alterity, as conveyed in the pristine sense of the word *communitas*: community as a 'nothing in common', nothing except for the condition of human commonality on a living planet.

Therefore, the case of social and environmental struggles in Bologna, analyzed through Esposito's *communitas*, enabled a critical reflection on the political community and a contribution to post-politics theory. However, this process is not limited to the context of Bologna. Following the discussion between critical geographers and political ecologists about the interplay of post-politics theory and climate struggles, this process has the potential and capacities to spread worldwide and advance *communitas* at multiple scales, inspired by (individual) sacrifice and collective solidarity and committed to fostering new ontologies and futures in the pursuit of environmental and climate justice.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Acknowledgement

Andrea Zinzani designed Sections 2 and 5, while Matteo Proto wrote Sections 3 and 4. Section 1 and Section 6 were designed by both authors.

References

- Aiken, G. T. (2017). The politics of community: Togetherness, transition and post-politics. *Environment & Planning A*, 49, 2383–2341.
- Anders Sandberg, L., et al. (2015). *Urban forests, trees, and greenspace. A political ecology perspective*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Arendt, H. (1982). *Lectures on Kant's political philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Badiou, A. (2010). *Communist hypothesis*. London: Verso.
- Bianchi, I. (2018). The post-political meaning of the concept of commons: The regulation of the urban commons in Bologna. *Space and Polity*, 22, 287–306.
- Bird, G., & Short, J. (2013). Community, immunity, and the proper: An introduction to the political theory of Roberto Esposito. *Angelaki*, 18, 1–12.
- Blakey, J. (2021). The politics of scale through Rancière. *Progress in Human Geography*, 45, 623–640.
- Blakey, J., Machen, R., Ruez, D., & Medina Garcia, P. (2022). Intervention: Engaging post-foundational political theory requires an 'enmeshed' approach. *Political Geography*, 1–9.
- Caciagli, C. (2019). Housing squats as "educational sites of resistance": The process of movement social base formation in the struggle for the house. *Antipode*, 51, 730–749.
- Carter White, R., & Minca, C. (2020). The camp and the question of community. *Political Geography*, 81, Article 10222.
- Crouch, C. (2004). *Post-democracy*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Di Feliciano, C., & O'Callaghan, C. (2020). Struggles over property in the 'post-political' era: Notes on the political from Rome and Dublin. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 38, 1–19.
- Dikec, M. (2005). Space, politics, and the political. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23, 171–188.
- Dikec, M. (2012). Politics is sublime. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 30, 262–279.
- Dikec, M., & Swyngedouw, E. (2017). Theorizing the politicizing city. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41, 1–18.
- Enright, T., & Rossi, U. (2018). Ambivalence of the urban commons. "Desiring the common in the post-crisis metropolis: Insurgencies, contradictions, appropriations". In *The urban political. Ambivalent spaces of late neoliberalism* (pp. 45–64). New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Ernstson, H., & Swyngedouw, E. (2019). Politicizing the environment in the urban century. In H. Ernstson, & E. Swyngedouw (Eds.), *Urban political ecology in the anthropo-obscene* (pp. 3–21). London and New York: Routledge.
- Esposito, R. (2010). *The origin and destiny of community*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Esposito, R. (2011). *Immunitas: The protection and negation of life, 2011*. Polity.
- Featherstone, D. (2013). The contested politics of climate change and the crisis of neo-liberalism. *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 12, 44–64.
- Hay, I. (2016). *Qualitative research methods in human geography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heynen, N. (2014). Urban political ecology I. *Progress in Human Geography*, 38(4), 598–604.
- Heynen, N., Kaika, M., & Swyngedouw, E. (2006). *In the Nature of Cities: Urban Political Ecology and the Politics of Urban Metabolism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Inston, K. (2020). Improper communities in the work of Roberto Esposito and Jacques Rancière. *Contemporary Political Theory*, 19, 621–641.
- Jouve, B., & Lefevre, C. (1997). When territorial political culture makes urban institution: The metropolitan city of Bologna. *Government and Policy*, 15(1), 89–111.
- Kenis, A. (2019). Post-politics contested: Why multiple voices on climate change do not equal politicisation. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, 37(5), 831–848.
- Kenis, A., & Lievens, M. (2014). Searching for the Political in environmental politics. *Environmental Politics*, 23, 531–548.
- Laclau, E. (1996). *Emancipation(s)*. London: Verso.
- Landau, F., Pohl, L., & Roskamm, N. (2021). *[Un]Grounding post-foundational geographies*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Lauermann, J. (2018). Municipal statecraft: Revisiting the geographies of the entrepreneurial city. *Progress in Human Geography*, 42, 205–224.
- Machin, A. (2013). *Negotiating climate change: Radical democracy and the illusion of consensus*. London and New York: Zed Books.
- Marchart, O. (2007). *Post-foundational political thought: Political difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Marchart, O. (2018). *Thinking antagonism. Political ontology after Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Mouffe, C. (1991). Democratic citizenship and the political community. In: Miami Theory collective. In *Community at loose ends* (pp. 70–82). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2000). *The democratic paradox*. London: Verso.
- Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. London: Routledge.
- Nancy, J. L. (1986). *La communauté désœuvrée*. Paris: Christian Bourgois.
- Nicholls, W., & Uitermark, J. (2016). Planning/resistance. *Urban Geography*, 38, 512–520.
- North, P., Nurse, A., & Barker, T. (2017). The neoliberalisation of climate? Progressive climate policy under austerity urbanism. *Environment & Planning A*, 49, 1797–1815.
- Panagia, D. (2018). *Rancière's sentiments*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Popke, J. (2003). Poststructuralist ethics: Subjectivity, responsibility and the space of community. *Progress in Human Geography*, 27(3), 298–316.
- Pruitt, H. (2003). Is the institutionalization of urban movements inevitable? A comparison of the opportunities for sustained squatting in New York city and Amsterdam. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 27, 133–157.
- Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement: Politics and philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rancière, J. (2010). *Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics*. London: Continuum.
- Richter, H. (2019). Beyond the 'other' as constitutive outside: The politics of immunity in Roberto Esposito and Niklas Luhmann. *European Journal of Political Theory*, 18, 216–237.
- Russel, B. (2019). Beyond the local trap: New municipalism and the rise of the fearless cities. *Antipode*, 51, 989–1010.
- Sprega, D., Frixa, E., & Proto, M. (2018). Identità, conflitti e riqualificazione: i processi partecipativi nel quartiere Bolognina. *Geotemas*, 56, 130–136.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2005). Governance innovation and the citizen: The Janus face of governance-beyond-the-state. *Urban Studies*, 42, 191–206.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2009). The antinomies of the post-political city: In search of a democratic politics of environmental production. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 33, 601–620.
- Swyngedouw, E. (2011). Interrogating post-democratization: Reclaiming egalitarian political spaces. *Political Geography*, 30, 370–380.
- Trentanovi, F., et al. (2021). Contested novel ecosystems: Socio-ecological processes and evidence from Italy. *Environmental Development*, 40, 1–13.
- Urry, J. (2011). *Climate change and society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Vasudevan, A. (2015). The autonomous city: Towards a critical geography of occupation. *Progress in Human Geography*, 39, 316–337.

Wetherell, M., Taylor, S., & Yates, S. J. (2001). *Discourse as data. A guide for analysis*. London and Milton Keynes: Sage Publications and The Open University.

Wilson, J., & Swyngedouw, E. (2014). *The post-political and its discontents: Spaces of depoliticisation, spectres of radical politics*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Zinzani, A., & Curzi, C. (2020). Urban regeneration, forests and socio-environmental conflicts: The case of Prati di Caprara in Bologna (Italy). *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 19, 163–186.

Žižek, S. (1999). *The ticklish subject: The absent centre of political ontology*. London: Verso.