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The repoliticisation of urban politics in Italy

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1) Introduction

For what regards the choice of the topic, phenomena of depoliticisation and consequent repoliticisation in other forms are very interesting matters of analysis and they should be investigated deeply and comprehensively. In particular, the local dimension represents a privileged arena where it is possible to offer new possibilities of engagement and civic participation for the common good. Given this evidence, urban studies turn out to be more than a mere transposition of national or supranational dynamics into the context of the city: their importance lies in the fact that the same social and political concepts are embodied in concrete actions, they are enriched and they gain significance. Thus, this thesis might be useful in better explaining and grasping new nuances of meaning of social involvement as far as the citizenry is concerned, as well as the good policies implemented by municipalities.

More precisely, the initial hypotheses of the dissertation are the ones referring to the fact that contemporary societies, especially in the Western world, are facing great challenges and critical problems for what refers to the legitimation of political leaders and parties. The instruments and the evidence gathered in order to support this stance are various, but in particular quantitative measures are used, ranging from tables of decreasing party membership to others displaying the lower turnout levels that seem to be showing no signs of improving. The rationale is to find common ground among all these findings and there is consistence of results in the situation of citizens being discouraged and not able to find proper answers to their needs in the world of political groups and institutions (at least they do not do so as much as they used to do decades ago).

Hence, the purpose of this dissertation coincides with trying to answer some of the questions that arise regarding these aspects: given this disengagement, is politics unthinkable except in terms of political parties? And the intellectual tools help us delineate a solution, since politics actually *is* thinkable in terms of socio-political institutions that are other than traditional political parties. Nowadays, in fact, repoliticisation instances are born everywhere, but the focus here is on Italy and on the local best practices that it offers. In face of modern problems and disengagement, the response of municipalities is often very targeted and effective, fostering participatory practices, urban resilience and innovative urban governance. The interactions with society are structured in a way that is necessarily responsive and where decision-makers are knowledgeable about the issues, thus a usual policy cycle corresponds to problem definition, agenda access and policy choice. In the concrete examples of some virtuous practices, the policies implemented in Rimini, Bologna and Rome are investigated.

2) The social context from which the dissertation starts: political disengagement and the crisis of popular involvement

2.1) Definitions of depoliticisation and democracy

As far as the dynamics of depoliticisation are concerned, it must be clear that the term indicates a series of actions, behaviours and choices that result in political disengagement, reducing politics to the mere policy dimension, with a substantial marginalisation both of the ideological conflict and of the polity intended as the social project of a certain community. In particular, some scholars define it as “the declining citizen interest and engagement with formal politics”¹ (Fawcett, Flinders, Hay and Wood, 2017) and the reasons for that are numerous and complex. One type of explanation may lie in the fact that “culture operates within nation-states through patterns of belief, practices of discipline, and the constitution of political subjects”² (Clemens, 2016). Undoubtedly, these patterns of influence vary over time and for concurring motivations they may have turned out to be disruptive, weakening the socio-political ties of traditional societies and the structures revolving around them.

When studying such phenomena, the point of departure may not coincide with the groups and the collective actions performed by them, but it may rather focus on single participants or simple citizens, since “the experience of being born into a society with a particular kind of organization (or choosing to relocate later in life) involves exposure to characteristic processes of *political socialization*”³ (Clemens, 2016). More precisely, “research on political socialization and participation has tended to begin with the individual in order to understand overall outcomes as aggregations of preferences, decisions, and acts of a great many citizens”⁴ (Clemens, 2016).

Historically, political parties and mass organisations have been able to attract millions of people into their ranks, they were pervasive, rooted deeply into societal mechanisms. This could be explained thanks to ideology, personal conviction or class identification. Today a new importance could instead be given to associational life, the civic community and their fundamental role in the society: “civil associations contribute to the effectiveness and stability of democratic government [...] both because of their "internal" effects on individual members and because of their "external" effects on the wider polity. Internally, associations instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity, and public spiritedness. [...] Externally, what twentieth-century political scientists have called "interest articulation" and "interest aggregation" are enhanced by a dense network of secondary associations”⁵ (Putnam, 1993). However, especially when associational life is absent or weak, mainstream politics has to reinvent itself trying to be socially attractive and engaging, but not all forms of democratic

innovation are proposed as a real shift of paradigm. “Today's discursive and institutional governance innovations are not innocent improvements to tackle deficits associated with national liberal-democratic regimes. Instead they represent ever more effective forms of disavowing the contingency of contemporary societies, and they silently paper over the multiple hierarchical differences that structure them”⁶ (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

Democracy can be a slippery concept depending on which measures and dimensions are chosen, so in order to investigate the dynamics of decreasing engagement in democratic politics, it is necessary to clarify from what citizens are moving away, namely from political organisations and parties that are the foundations of democracy. Thus the definition of democracy to be used here may be Przeworski's one identifying it as “a political arrangement in which people select governments through elections [...] Democracy is simply a system in which incumbents lose elections and leave when they lose”⁷ (Przeworski, 2019). Besides this, drawing on Donatella Della Porta's contributions, the notion of democracy has generally coincided with either “procedural criteria (such as free, competitive and periodic elections) or normative definitions, centred around the ability of a government to respect and reflect the will of the people”⁸ (Della Porta, 2013). Focusing on this last aspect, choices such as delegation and privatisation, if linked to a more technocratic and managerialist approach, could result in anti-politics, or however in forms of exclusion of all those citizens who are not entitled to intervene or who do not have the proper competences to do so. In fact, “privatising public services and delegating to quasi-autonomous, often technocratic bodies, may have some potential for democratisation, as in the example of ‘collaborative governance’ arrangements, but this is very much embryonic and uncertain. [This could exclude] vast groups of the public who lose both presence (they are not appointed technocrats) and voice (they cannot speak the technocratic language). This poses a substantial legitimacy problem theorists of democratic innovations need to address”⁹ (Flinders, Wood and Corbett, 2020) and in general any kind of anti-politics implies dynamics that pose threats to democratic innovations because they question the democratic base upon which innovative democratic institutions are built. Furthermore, “as competitors to traditional representative institutions for organising politics in and of themselves, these forms of engagement are fragmented, highly voluntaristic, and without the procedural checks and balances of traditional representative government”¹⁰ (Flinders, Wood and Corbett, 2020).

Going back to the great political participation of decades ago, an interesting explanation could be the one of the “logic of collective action”¹¹ (Olson, 1965) fostering activism by supplying exclusive incentives to members and activists. Nevertheless, all these stimuli today are not sufficient anymore and academic research has confirmed that traditional liberal democracies are experiencing troubles that are leading to a real crisis of popular involvement in politics.

Especially for what regards Western type democracies, we sometimes refer to “the decline of party activism and membership across the democratic world”¹² (Whiteley, 2010) or otherwise adopting a “minimalist and electoralist view of democracy”¹³ (Przeworski, 2019) including a lot of socio-spatial dimensions where “democracy without a demos”¹⁴ (Mair, 2006) is taking place, especially in the most basic form of participatory action, namely elections, or in the manifestation of membership to a certain party. The latter aspect is exemplified in the following table:

TABLE 3: *Change in party membership, 1980–2000*

Country	Period	Party membership as % of electorate		Change in numbers of party members	Change as % of original membership
		Start of period	End of period		
France	1978–99	5.05	1.57	–1,122,128	–64.59
Italy	1980–98	9.66	4.05	–2,091,887	–51.54
UK	1980–98	4.12	1.92	–853,156	–50.39
Norway	1980–97	15.35	7.31	–218,891	–47.49
Finland	1980–98	15.74	9.65	–206,646	–34.03
Netherlands	1980–2000	4.29	2.51	–136,459	–31.67
Austria	1980–99	28.48	17.66	–446,209	–30.21
Switzerland	1977–97	10.66	6.38	–118,800	–28.85
Sweden	1980–98	8.41	5.54	–142,533	–28.05
Denmark	1980–98	7.30	5.14	–70,385	–25.52
Ireland	1980–98	5.00	3.14	–27,856	–24.47
Belgium	1980–99	8.97	6.55	–136,382	–22.10
Germany	1980–99	4.52	2.93	–174,967	–8.95
Portugal	1980–2000	4.28	3.99	50,381	17.01
Greece	1980–98	3.19	6.77	375,000	166.67
Spain	1980–2000	1.20	3.42	808,705	250.73

Source: MAIR, P. (2006) Ruling the void? The Hollowing of Western Democracy. *New Left Review* [Online] no. 42. p.25¹⁵

2.2) Which crisis and which signs

In the context of what has been globally called a “risk society”¹⁶ (Beck, 1992) the decreasing rates of democratic participation, of general involvement or of simple interest for politics are recognised by many as worrying contingencies. This is especially true if we conceive politics as depending on legitimacy as a definitional aspect, so if citizens do not participate in the fundamental processes of democracy, they do not corroborate those same dynamics. Rather,

they weaken those proceedings since they do not legitimise them through their actions of sharing support. (Support not on the level of appreciation for one party or another, but more generally for the institutional system of representative democracy as a whole). In this sense, it can be useful to recall the definition by Sartori of politics: “a sphere of collective and sovereign decisions”¹⁷ (Sartori, 1973) and unfortunately less and less people decide, vote and express political preferences. Academic work in this field “suggests a combination of political disengagement and cynicism towards parties and political elites”¹⁸ (Webb, 2005) so it is sure that regarding the signs of crisis “something is happening. [...] Electoral participation is declining in many countries to historically unprecedented levels. Confidence in politicians, parties, parliaments, and governments is falling. Even the support for democracy as a system of government has weakened. [...] Is democracy in crisis? Is this change epochal?”¹⁹ (Przeworski, 2019).

In order to properly answer this question, it is necessary to use a definition: if democracy is in “crisis”, what is a “crisis” in such a complex set of institutions? And again Przeworski is enlightening, defining crises as “situations in which the condition under the status quo [of] institutions is some kind of a disaster: no change occurs, but it may”²⁰ (Przeworski, 2019). With this in mind, I can cite different signs of crisis, especially focusing on something that can be conceived as close to everyday life, such as interest for politics exemplified by Patterson in the fact that in the USA “in 1960, 60 percent of the nation’s television households had their sets on and tuned to the October presidential debates. In 2000, less than 30 percent were tuned in”²¹ (Patterson, 2002). However, depending on authors, some indicators may be taken into consideration while others may not, so Przeworski would focus on more serious dimensions of crisis: “the visible signals that democracy is in crisis include a sudden loss of support for established parties, withdrawal of popular confidence in democratic institutions and politicians, overt conflicts over democratic institutions, or an incapacity of governments to maintain public order without repression”²² (Przeworski, 2019) and luckily this last event hardly ever takes place in Western type democracies. Going further with the analysis, it could be possible to take into account “4 measures [of crisis]: voter turnout, party membership, trust in politicians, and interest in politics”²³ (Tormey, 2016), but more precisely I will structure my analysis following the steps that were identified by Peter Mair²⁴ (Mair, 2013).

2.3) Mair’s two concomitants: politics on the ground and public policy

According to Mair, there are two fundamental concomitants regarding the crisis of popular involvement in politics and the decreasing engagement in political organisations. More

precisely, he firstly underlines that indifference is not unidirectional, from citizens towards political parties, but rather it is “on the part of both the citizenry and the political class: they are withdrawing and disengaging from one another, and it is in this sense that there is an emptying of the space in which citizens and their representatives interact”²⁵ (Mair, 2013). Then we might ask who is going to fill that void, namely “in terms of politics on the ground, the widening gap between rulers and ruled has facilitated the often strident populist challenge”²⁶ (Mair, 2013). So it could be argued that for the first time in contemporary history the ruling class itself has started to be questioned, not single inadequate politicians, but politics as a whole, with its representatives and with decision-makers identified as elites, and often as corrupt ones. “The second concomitant [...] operates at the level of public policy, and may be seen in the growing acceptability and legitimation of non-political, or depoliticized, modes of decision-making. Among the important manifestations of this tendency are the growing significance (in both range and weight) of so-called non-majoritarian institutions’ [...] and other supranational and international agencies”²⁷ (Mair, 2013). These two vectors that mutually reinforce each other on the political divide (or that rather enfeeble each other) can factually lead on the one hand to the populist alternative while on the other hand to the technocratic one. In particular, mistrust for democracy and its mechanisms can be understood under many different assumptions, but too much appreciation for populism implies the rule of the majority without the certainty of minority’s rights protection, whereas technocracy entails that those who have the power do not have to respond to anyone for their actions, i.e. “both forms of challenges [to party democracy] dispense with accountability”²⁸ (Caramani, 2017).

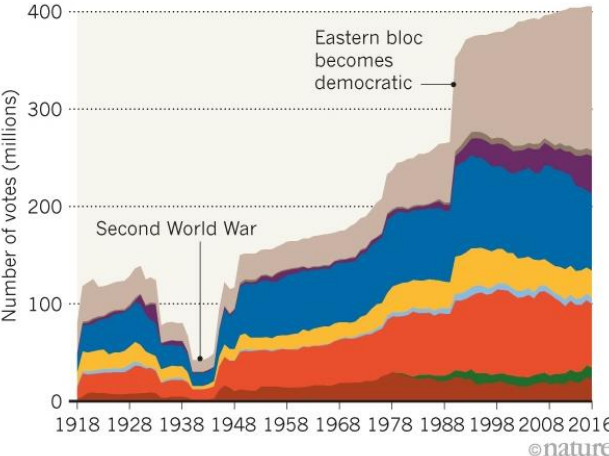
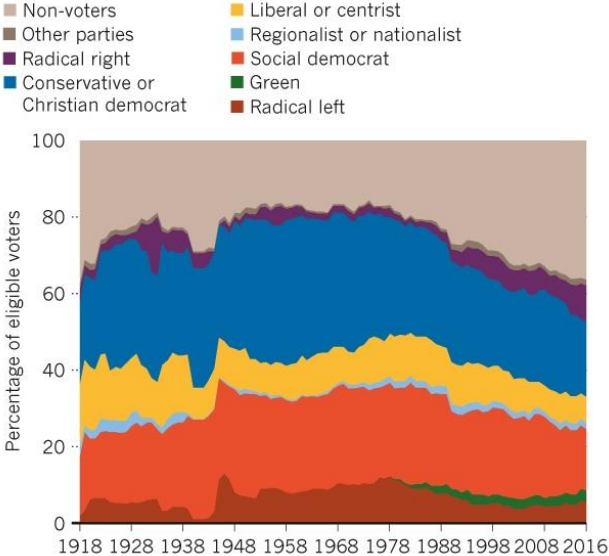
2.4) Citizen disengagement and electoral participation

Coming back to the paradigm of party democracy, there is progressively more and more literature on such a topic, but sometimes the data and evidence of citizen disengagement, less turnout and other similar patterns are disputed, or at least their relevance is undervalued since those results are interpreted as individual cases without serious consequences or negative spillovers. For instance, “the fact that levels of participation in national elections do not always register a sharp or very steady decline [...] is sometimes cited as evidence of a continuing popular commitment to conventional politics, even though the small changes that do occur in this regard are often consistent with other trends that appear to underline a wide-scale pattern of withdrawal”²⁹ (Mair, 2013). However, the field of study of comparative political research should guide our understanding and the available pieces of information all indicate the same declining trajectory of people’s involvement, together with the fact that, importantly, there is convergence of indicators beyond the boundaries of a single State, considering cross-national analysis. Hence, for what regards specifically electoral

participation, its downturn is not a recent phenomenon: in fact, declining turnout dates back to the 1980s and the 1990s as a continuous and systematic withdrawal from democratic systems and processes. If Europe is taken into consideration, the limited drop that aggregate data suggest should not be underestimated, neither should some very few exceptions be regarded as contradictory facts, but rather they should always be contextualised and seen under the lenses of a composite framework of consistency of results. It is exactly this collective schema to be exemplified in the two following charts:

THE RISE OF EUROPE'S NON-VOTERS

Turnout in national elections across Europe has fallen steadily since the 1980s, from about 80% to just under 65% today.



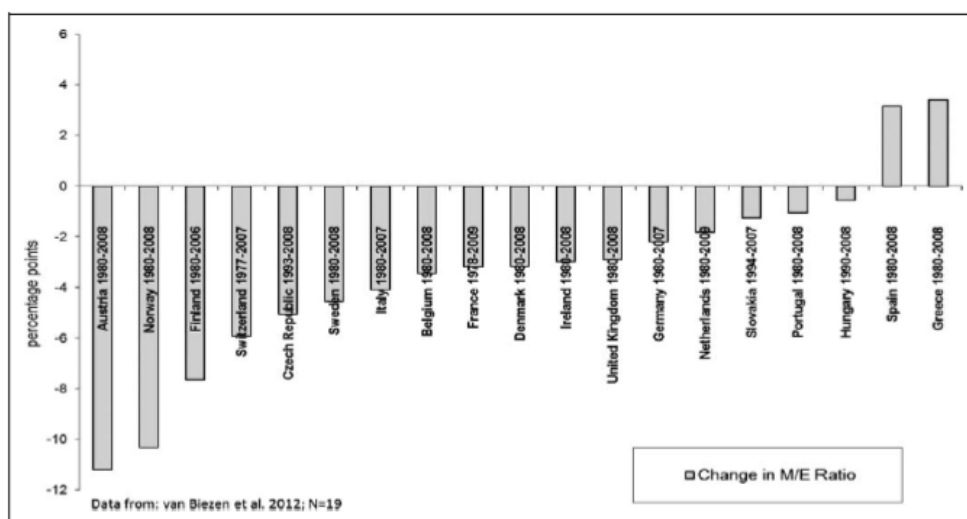
Source: Oxenham, S. (2017) The rise of political apathy in two charts³⁰

From this evidence what can be inferred is that the 1990s represent a turning point and Mair informs that “not only do the last decades hold the record for the lowest turnout of any postwar decade in western Europe, but within the great majority of west European democracies, most, or even all of the record low turnouts have occurred since 1990”³¹ (Mair, 2013).

2.5) Electoral volatility, party loyalty and party membership

From the indifference towards voting we then move to the inconsistency of voting. Contemporary democracies might be “experiencing a phase of party breakdown, dealignment and decay”³² (Bartolini and Mair, 1990), but it is also true that the very act of voting is personal and unique for everyone, as well as “membership of political parties is diverse. Not everyone participates and those who do, do not participate in the same way”³³ (van Haute and Gauja, 2017). Having said that, it is possible to specify that another “key aggregate indicator relates to the behaviour of those citizens who do participate, and measures the extent to which their voting patterns reveal consistency and stability [...] of partisan preferences”³⁴ (Mair, 2013). We could therefore foresee that, given the general lack of interest, voters might be more inconsistent, irregular and uncertain than before. This is in fact the result of Mair’s dissertation, but it does not remain unchallenged: on the contrary, other scholars contend that even if conventional political participation may be in decline, “those who continue to participate in traditional politics exhibit stability and substance in electoral choice, opinion formation and policy deliberation [at least in the USA]”³⁵ (Bennett, 1998), so a tangible degree of conscious and active involvement still exists for electors and observers of the political arena, together with a certain influence of partisan cueing, for which I adopt the definition that can be deduced from this passage: “the ability of parties to not only reflect, but actually shape, citizens' preferences on policy issues [...] i.e. the impact of party cues on citizens' preferences on high-salience issues”³⁶ (De Sio, Paparo et al., 2020). As far as party loyalty is concerned, we now witness a “broadscale erosion of the public's partisan identities in virtually all advanced industrial democracies [...] [resulting in] parties without partisans”³⁷ (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2003). As a consequence, all the classic theories of political science do not hold anymore, or they are at least much weaker now: the politicisation of social cleavages has turned out to be not so relevant and the same is valid for all the approaches that are based on party identification having a central role in voting. In parallel, historical records tell us that with the advent of new technologies a continuous change towards a professionalisation of political campaigns has consolidated: since more citizens are disengaged, it is also true that potentially more voters can be convinced, “split-ticket voting [...] has risen”³⁸ (Mair, 2013) and in fact in many elections the vote of the undecided and of switchers (especially in the case of the USA) is determinant. Hence, public opinion is always monitored and the dynamics of communication are wisely crafted by experts. In particular, given minor party loyalty, “political parties have adapted to partisan dealignment by strengthening their internal organizational structures and partially isolating [...] Centralized, professionalized parties with short time horizons have replaced the ideologically driven mass

parties of the past.”³⁹ (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2003). So we get to the last fundamental dimension of the crisis: party membership. “Amidst a now extensive literature on the imputed 'decline of party' in Western democracies, particular emphasis has been placed on the theme of organisational decline and on the supposed erosion of the organisational links which tie parties to electors”⁴⁰ (Katz and Mair, 1992). As it is the case for electoral participation, we find again the date of 1990: “the most striking feature to be noted is the sheer extent and consistency of membership decline through to the end of the 1990s. Not only have levels of party membership continued to decline as a proportion of the electorate [...] there is now also compelling evidence of a major decline in the absolute numbers of party members across all the long-established European democracies”⁴¹ (van Biezen and Mair, 2001). Obviously, parties in turn have changed, relieving the responsibilities of having a party card and accepting all degrees of participation. But there’s more: “many parties have updated their recruitment strategies and offer softer routes for joining their ranks. In some parties, registered sympathizers are given virtually the same rights as traditional members with substantially lower costs [but] why would somebody take the further step of joining such parties as full members rather than sympathizers?”⁴² (Gomez, Ramiro, Morales and Aja, 2019) and this question is crucial, since it shows that sometimes the patch is worse than the hole. In this regard, there are several methods to measure party membership. The most straightforward one is the number of the members of a party, but also the ratio of party membership to the size of the electorate can be used. Among the numerous tables that one can find, the following employs the latter method and is surely striking:



Change in M/E ratios since the 1980s.

Source: van Biezen, I., Poguntke, T. (2014) The decline of membership-based politics⁴³

It is necessary to specify that “the downward trend is not necessarily linear”⁴⁴ (van Biezen, Poguntke, 2014) but it is consistent in the aggregate data and what is evident is that the columns with positive values do not compensate for the ones with negative values. One last aspect to mention is the one regarding associations, organisations connected to political parties, trade unions, religious cooperatives and all similar associational spaces: the crisis of popular involvement affects at different degrees, but however significantly, also these social structures. Hence, regarding the causes underlying all these cases of withdrawal, it is useful to keep in mind what Schattschneider asserted: “the political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties”⁴⁵ (Schattschneider, 1942).

3) Is this true? Is modern democracy inconceivable save in terms of political parties?

3.1) From a depoliticised society to a less politicised one

It is undoubtedly true that political parties represent the backbone of institutional and societal structures upon which the public dimension is based. However, collectivity and the attention towards the common good have progressively found (and are still finding and experimenting) new participatory platforms and situations where proactive action can be canalized. In general terms, “modern political democracy is a system of governance in which rulers are held accountable for their actions in the public realm by citizens, acting indirectly through the competition and cooperation of their elected representatives”⁴⁶ (Schmitter and Karl, 1991), but that same cooperation (or competition) may happen to be among citizens, especially if political dynamics are localized in the urban realm. This would be considered as citizen participation, but as a direct one, as an unmediated form of participation (replacing representation). Parvin notes that “citizen participation in a democracy acts as a check on elite power. It prevents the rise of civil oligarchies and the capture of democratic institutions by privileged groups, and ensures that democratic structures are not reformed in ways which result in the systemic exclusion of non-elites over the longer term”⁴⁷ (Parvin, 2018). Especially in recent years, modern democracy can also be thought in terms of urban movements, citizens’ committees, ideological movements, associations and non-profit organisations.

Institutions and political organisations are progressively less and less regarded as the subjects elaborating responses to the demands of the citizens, since those demands are addressed to different actors or they may not be articulated at all, due to indifference. Therefore, it is possible to name this phenomenon a “democratic deconsolidation”⁴⁸ (Foa and Mounk, 2016) but we can also be less alarming and it can be argued that “democracy retains no serious

political competitors. Nevertheless, there has been [...] a tendency for citizens in established democracies to question their political institutions”⁴⁹ (Pharr and Putnam, 2002).

It is possible to adopt a dual perspective: on the one hand, focusing on a bottom-up perspective, i.e. relative to how society expresses political questions, organizing itself into political subjects (parties, groups of interest) that structure conflict and political consensus and interact in the public debate, providing the fundamental inputs of the political system; on the other hand, examining the top-down flow, or by adopting the point of view of the institutions that aggregate political demands and respond through the production of policies, which is the main output of the political system.

Regarding the disaffection towards politics, if one can speak of a fault, then that fault lies on both sides of the political divide: different reasons keep politicians away from the voters and voters in turn are not interested in politics because of deep-rooted causes. It is important to remind that different observations suggest that even though conventional political participation may be in decline, “those who continue to participate in traditional politics exhibit stability and substance in electoral choice, opinion formation and policy deliberation”⁵⁰ (Bennett, 1998), so a certain degree of conscious and active involvement still exists. According to De Blasio and Sorice, responses to the aforementioned signs of crisis can be grouped in three major trends: “the first is represented by the increase in social apathy [...]. The crisis of representation, in other words, sharpens the crisis of legitimacy of the democratic system, which is increasingly perceived as ‘illusory’ and in any case unable to give citizens real power in decision-making processes. The second tendency is specular to the first and results in a request for greater control by citizens of representative institutions. [...] The systematic distrust of representatives (elected officials and ‘politicians’) produces what is today defined as sanctioning democracy because it was founded not so much on the desire to have a greater impact on decision-making processes and on the basic choices of policies but on the need for a sanctioning control over the work of the representatives (which therefore becomes unreliable ‘in principle,’ except to be denied by the checks). The third trend is different and consists of the request for new forms of political participation. Most U.S. and European research (see, e.g., the Eurobarometer and the European Social Survey) has shown that the crisis in the credibility and legitimacy of representation, whose most obvious outcome is the crisis of political parties, is accompanied by a strong social rooting of the values of democracy, although sometimes with some critical areas and relative requests for ‘strong’ leadership. Within this trend, we can place the emergence of new participatory actors: from nongovernmental organisations to ‘grassroots’ initiatives promoted by citizens to movements

for global justice to spontaneous local initiatives (those that are defined as do-it-yourself politics)⁵¹ (De Blasio and Sorice, 2019).

3.2) From a less politicised society to a repoliticised one

There are a lot of socio-spatial dimensions that are instrumental in repoliticising societies: urban movements, citizens' committees, ideological movements, associations and non-profit organisations represent to various degrees the possibility of reviving political participation and of politicising social dynamics and conflicts. If we ask ourselves what types of undesirable situations could motivate governmental intervention, a safe answer would be to say that probably an unattended public value would be a key determinant. After a certain policy cycle, a given issue can be framed differently, the problem definition may be altered significantly but what is sure is that civic participation and the voicing of a problem are crucial. Putnam adds to this that "one key indicator of civic sociability must be the vibrancy of associational life"⁵² (Putnam, 1993) and even in less politicised societies a flourishing of numerous civic realities can be witnessed. In particular, "citizenship in the civic community entails equal rights and obligations for all. Such a community is bound together by horizontal relations of reciprocity and cooperation, not by vertical relations of authority and dependency"⁵³ (Putnam, 1993) and all of this this establishes a virtuous circle that finds consistence also in the institutional performance and in the quality of democracy correlated to the respective associational life. In fact, "regions with high turnout for referenda and low use of the personal preference ballot are virtually the same regions with a closely woven fabric of civic associations and a high incidence of newspaper readership"⁵⁴ (Putnam, 1993). Different streams of data support the assertion according to which more civic culture, more sharing of collective life and more awareness of current affairs all contribute to a better democracy and to a repoliticisation of politics, especially of urban politics, if the steps of implementation (and before it, decision-making) happen in a public context and at the local level.

Besides this, "policy can provide motives - or not - for political participation, but it can also contribute to the capacity for political organization. This dynamic is particularly pronounced when governments rely on private or party organizations to carry out important political functions ranging from the mobilization of voters to the delivery of publicly funded services"⁵⁵ (Clemens, 2016). In general, what is sure is that the crucial elements leading to policy success might be considered to be the involvement of the civil society and the openness of decision-makers to work with competent experts to find innovative solutions. In fact, citizens may be concerned to different degrees about numerous issues and with diverse urgency because, along with objective factors, there is always a very significant part of

subjectivity: the perceived seriousness and importance of a problem depend on our ways of grasping the complexities of phenomena i.e. it is something that is socially created.

More precisely, “policy feedback models exemplify institutional accounts of reproduction as current public programs construct voter preferences and patterns of participation that produce pressure for the continuation of those same programs. Different configurations of policy may minimize pressure for their continuation, allowing for a pattern of change through restriction of government benefits. In many circumstances, however, institutional effects may generate grievances alongside pressures for reproduction. In such cases, the first question raised involves the balance of forces among those who are advantaged and those who might come to see their disadvantage as a reason to mobilize for change. The second question turns on when and how such mobilization for change occurs - and when it makes change happen”⁵⁶ (Clemens, 2016). Undoubtedly, the discourse about change, and especially structural change, has not disappeared from the policy analysis literature, it may just have changed form: for instance, “in eco-politics the paradigm of 'adaptation' and 'resilience' to supposedly 'inevitable' environmental and social change has become dominant, and politics more generally seems to have been reduced to a best-practice competition in the execution of non-negotiable market imperatives. Partially reflecting this, the recent eco-sociological literature displays a marked loss of confidence not only in the achievability of meaningful international climate agreements, but also in a range of other narratives which were once major sources of eco-political hope: the belief in increasingly powerful and international grassroots movements for an ecologically more benign socio-economic order”⁵⁷ (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). Personally, I tend to refuse such a pessimistic thesis, since especially the urban scale is not a minor scale and it should be considered as a mirror to look at in order to understand broader phenomena, such as the environmental ones that were cited before. More precisely, the local dynamics of social movements and committees are at the core of the production and reproduction of these greater events of a global nature, politicising social conflicts and conveying ways of interpreting the world: “democratisation is a performative act that both stages and defines equality, exposes a wrong, and aspires to a transformation of the senses and of the sensible, to render commonsense what was non-sensible before”⁵⁸ (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

There can be at least two analytical perspectives for urban studies, two different approaches to look at the city: the former is to conceive the city as the object of public policies (structure dimension), the latter tends to see it as a political subject (agency dimension). It would be too superficial to look at urban movements as real and concrete dimensions of participation not deserving new analytical instruments. The experience of the urban level informs that in the

city there are many forms of participation even in times of post-representation and economic crisis (people feel to have chances to impact on policies). The most straightforward result of this are citizens' committees, aggregations of citizens with some characteristics: they are based on specific, peculiar (not universalistic) identities and they mobilise for single, locally-based issues. They use protests but also conventional repertoires: networks, access to the media, contacts with parties, juridical and administrative paths. As brilliantly exposed by Wilson and Swyngedouw, “their performative and localised inscriptions are the eventual time-spaces from where a new democratising political sequence may unfold. Insurgent democratic politics, therefore, are radically anti-utopian; they are not about fighting for a utopian future, but are precisely about bringing into being, spatialising, what is already promised by the very principle upon which the political is constituted, i.e. equalitarian emancipation.”⁵⁹ (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014).

4) The response of local governments and municipalities

4.1) Urban resilience

If on one side the civil society re-elaborates political participation at the local level, on the side of those who govern the response is equally effective: participatory budgeting initiatives, democratic innovation or maybe even e-democracy could be brought as virtuous examples. The intention is more and more the one of decentralising, putting people at the centre, and also re-territorialising the dimensions of the administrative action: in fact, the creation of local committees is encouraged as well as the formation of civic groups for the care and regeneration of urban commons, starting with the committees and associations that already exist.

What is sure is that all these dynamics take place in a social context that is precisely defined: namely, the city. Cities will be the place where most of the world population will live by the 21st century. They already are the place where most of the GDP is produced and where most of human consumption happens. Furthermore, the governance of the urban context can be cited as a virtuous example in the application of global goals (e.g. the SDGs, Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda) into the local dimension. More precisely, all these issues concur in structuring and strengthening what could be called urban resilience: “the capacity of urban systems, communities, individuals, organisations and businesses to recover maintain their function and thrive in the aftermath of a shock or a stress, regardless its impact, frequency or magnitude”⁶⁰ (Frantzeskaki, 2016). In fact, especially nowadays, the pandemic represents an unprecedented opportunity to structure the urban space in a more reticular and democratic way. Social inclusion, territorial cohesion, environmental justice as non-

negotiable values can be placed at the centre of urbanisation processes in order to fill in the aforementioned democratic gaps involving citizens.

The dimensions of urban resilience should not only be investigated under the light of sustainability and the environment, but also in connection with the social fabric: it is urgent to focus on the reconstruction of polycentric cities, with more interconnected centres, reorganising the spatiality of the urban context according to a very specific logic of urban governance and cooperation among citizens and institutions. For what could regard a reflection on administrative powers, cities need regulatory tools, power and autonomy to best implement the objectives they set themselves. In short, what is needed and highlighted by scholars and policymakers is a logic that should not be just local addressing isolated point-like initiatives, but rather an integrated plan of collaborative governance with the sharing of best practices. Urban regeneration must be democratic and must involve citizens, civic groups and associations by giving systemic and concrete responses. Once this is achieved, social resilience can be tangible: “social resilience is conceptualized as the capacity of people to self-organise and mobilise their skills and abilities to source new opportunities and to create new forms of innovation as well as their capacity to act with solidarity in the aftermath of a disturbance”⁶¹ (Frantzeskaki, 2016). This is especially true if attention is drawn to the fact that cities have always been a reflection of society, of the needs and duties of the citizens who live there, and therefore they too must have the ability to model themselves, to adapt, to transform themselves continuously and increasingly quickly, after every disruptive event. It is in the city that every working, economic and social relationship of the citizens takes place. It is thus necessary to demand resilient cities, to ask local politicians to create urban agglomerations that can be closer to the recipients of public services, keeping in mind that people experience the city in all its forms and with different times and needs.

4.2) Ancient and modern problems: some solutions

Regarding some of the aforementioned topics, Hannah Arendt elaborates the theme of the lost polis and asks herself how to recover the participation that has almost disappeared. In her work it is asserted that it is necessary to resume the political meaning of the “active life”⁶² (Arendt, 1958), typical of the Greek city-states to defend freedom and recreate the conditions of an active and shared political life. The predominant Greek concept is that of the *bios politikos*, which means politics as a free man's political life based on action (*praxis*) and speech (*lexis*).

Over the centuries, however, theoretical contemplation has become a meaningless activity. Thought itself has turned into a brain function typical not only of sentient beings, but also of

electronic tools. Human work has undergone a process of increasing automation and the sphere of action has been subjected to that of doing and utility. The result was the depoliticisation of doing and the transfer of political power into the hands of few people. In conclusion, Arendt criticizes modern society because it has privileged the economic and utilitarian aspect and affirms that the political character of the action that puts citizens in relation to each other should prevail.

Nevertheless, the theoretical framework would not be complete without making reference to a further development of these intuitions. In fact, sufficient attention has to be paid to the approach that most effectively explains these social aspects: the theory of collective action. This speculation tries to solve all the different issues mentioned above, linking the widespread lack of interest with a possible response, devised to be engaging and adequate for many systems of social interactions. Thus, it is asserted that more responsibilities also bring to more control and comprehension of the phenomena someone is dealing with. On the other hand, it is equally true that those responsibilities coincide with a certain degree of commitment and the spending of time, even if the benefits resulting from active participation accrue to the whole society, not just to those who are engaged and operative. Hence, it is crucial for associations, movements and political parties to “meet the demands of its members. This explanation is grounded in the theory of collective action set out by Olson (1965), Tullock (1971) and Ostrom (1998), that identifies a fundamental problem of politics that the benefits of political action accrue to both participants and non-participants, whereas the costs are borne by participants alone, so it is in each individual’s self-interest to freeride on the activism of others. It is generally understood that successful groups solve this collective action problem by providing benefits exclusively to participants that act as selective incentives to motivate participation. (Buchanan, 1965; Olson, 1965)”⁶³ (Morrow and Meadowcroft, 2019).

Hence, municipalities and local institutions in general could solve the problem of participation (that is an ancient as well as a modern problem) by granting some kind of profits, help or benefits to the citizens who distinguish themselves for some sort of good behaviour or positive effort for the city and the community as a whole. Besides this, another way of rewarding citizens can be the one of giving importance to their opinions by involving them directly: for instance, citizen juries and deliberative polls could be recalled. More precisely, a project worth mentioning is the one of D-CENT, gathering various physical and digital participatory experiences and applied in different urban contexts. “D-CENT (Decentralised Citizens ENGagement Technologies) was a Europe-wide project bringing together citizen-led organisations that have transformed democracy in the past years, and

helping them in developing the next generation of open source, distributed, and privacy-aware tools for direct democracy and economic empowerment.”⁶⁴



An illustration of the participatory process.

Source: D-CENT (2016) Available at: <https://dcentproject.eu/about-us/>⁶⁵

4.3) Innovative urban governance

Undoubtedly, effective actions performed in the urban context can also be something more than semi-private initiatives that are then transposed to different cities. Instead, a real logic of public cooperation and of sharing of best practices can exist. In this case, synergistic dynamics can be created and the role of local institutions becomes crucial: cities turn out to be not just objects of public policies or places where national policies are implemented, but rather they become real political subjects fostering change. For instance, the C40 experience is explicative of the will of these cities in “taking bold climate action, leading the way towards a healthier and more sustainable future.”⁶⁶ In particular, the response of local governments and municipalities is explicit in designing a fair and green urban future, starting from the recognition of the utmost responsibilities of cities in the management of natural resources and in the protection of the environment: “The majority of the world’s GHG emissions come from cities. As urban populations increase, we know that building compact, resilient and well-connected communities is our best chance to preserve our global resources and fragile biodiversity for future generations. Now more than ever, we must harness a model for low-carbon urban development that promotes a thriving and inclusive future for all city residents.”⁶⁷

Furthermore, a cooperative governance can also help in setting some standards and in enhancing performance by comparison and mutual aid: for instance, the Co-Cities Report aims at building a “CoCities Index”⁶⁸ to measure the implementation of the EU and UN Urban Agenda. “The Co-Cities project, whose conceptual framework has been developed by LabGov -LABoratory for the GOVernance of the city as a commons-, investigates pioneering

forms of collaborative city-making in urban areas [...] promoting shared, collaborative, polycentric urban co-governance, as well as leading urban experimentations and nurturing local innovations. [...] The project consists in tracking and analysing innovative experiences of participatory and collective governance in cities worldwide”⁶⁹ and this is absolutely necessary.

In order to better grasp the nuances of meaning of co-governance, it may be useful to firstly make reference to the “quintuple helix model, i.e. social innovators, public authorities, businesses, civil society organizations, and knowledge institutions.”⁷⁰ Having clarified this, a definition of co-governance could sum up the aspects of the management of urban commons with a perspective that goes beyond the classic public and public/private governance approach. In fact, a proper definition involves cooperation among all these numerous stakeholders (of at least five types, not just two). “It implies a new, more active, and inclusive role of local communities, that engage in a shared decision-making process by partnering with other relevant actors.”⁷¹ These actions of partnering and of redesigning the urban space might concur in encouraging processes of reterritorialisation, defined as “the reconfiguration and re-scaling of forms of territorial organisation”⁷² (Brenner, 1999) and it is an unaltered dynamic of spatial restructuring taking place all over the world. The re-scaling from the national dimension to the localised-urban level is particularly evident in advanced countries like the USA: “We are a nation of cities. The 1980 census reported that almost three out of every four Americans lived in urban areas, and estimates are that the 1990 census will show that the proportion of the population living in urban areas will increase further”⁷³ (Rich, 1990).

For what regards innovative urban governance, in recent years many robust networks of influential cities have developed: John Allen defines them as “more than connections, less than domination and control”⁷⁴ (Allen, 2010). This is especially true if the governance of cities is taken as a model to be transposed to higher levels of policy-making, understanding broader policies through cities and actually focusing on the relational politics of local institutions. “Powerful cities are often distinguished from others by the concentration and mix of resources at their disposal. The right mix, the right people and skills, along with the ability to do something with them marks off the more powerful from the less powerful cities”⁷⁵ (Allen, 2010). The really flourishing cities are thus the ones who succeed in combining innovation with homogeneous development and cohesion, avoiding the risk of “Frankenstein urbanism [with] disconnected and often incongruous pieces of urban fabric [...] generated by the forced union of different, incompatible elements”⁷⁶ (Cugurullo, 2018). An effective way to be sure that these drawbacks do not concretize is to try to connect every sector of the city to the others, to be innovative in decentralising and in digitalising services in order to really

make them at the disposal of everyone: “Software-enabled technologies and urban big data have become essential to the functioning of cities. Consequently, urban operational governance and city services are becoming highly responsive to a form of data-driven urbanism that is the key mode of production for smart cities”⁷⁷ (Kitchin, 2016).

In this sense, if one looks at the Resilient Cities Network⁷⁸, for instance, a convincing confirmation can be found for what concerns “an underlying transition in global urban policy and discourse from the city as a sustainability problem to the city as a sustainability solution”⁷⁹ (Angelo and Wachsmuth, 2020). The importance of urban resilience is connected to the issues of risk management, mitigation and adaptation. Compared to the past, the risks and dangers to which urban centres are exposed today are increasingly diversified and complex. Therefore, it is no longer possible to consider one risk at a time and detached from the others to provide for a consequent specific defence mechanism; but an integrated and structured approach to risk is needed, which makes the city more flexible to change. Such an approach can only be correlated to innovation and to an effective governance of the commons, thus the examples of best practices are listed for instance in the UIA website (Urban Innovative Actions⁸⁰), the URBACT Organisation⁸¹ or Horizon Europe⁸². In any of the virtuous cases that it is possible to mention, the innovative aspect of urban governance lies also in the fact that local governments respond not just mobilising their own resources, but looking for solutions outside the perimeter of the institutions: the involvement of the civil society becomes crucial and the City Science Initiative is illuminating. In fact, “many key societal challenges in Europe are intrinsically urban. Science and Innovation can help to address these challenges. The City Science Initiative provides an opportunity for cities, city networks, experts and the services of the European Commission to reinforce their cooperation and strengthen the science and policy interface”⁸³ (European Commission, 2021).

5) The interactions between the two sides: society and local institutions

5.1) Problem definition

What is clear is that politics cannot exist without an active society and at the same time a community that wants to improve the institutions and resources of the common good cannot do so without politics. The objective here is thus to investigate the social and political dynamics that underlie policy choices and decision-making, especially at the local level. In a general context of disaffection towards politics, the urban dimension is increasingly becoming a complex and composite arena of repoliticisation where the interventions of different agents intertwine. The social framework influences the typologies of civic interactions and at the same time it is in turn influenced by citizens and their choices. The crosscutting nature of

social problems involves the city in a network of relationships with other levels of government and non-governmental actors. There are different dimensions of governance (urban, metropolitan and multi-level) and together with these, the contribution of the civil society is crucial in determining the complexity and peculiarity of the implementation of public policies in urban contexts. In particular, grassroots movements and local efforts are fundamental in contributing to create problem definitions and to voice issues. Experiences of volunteering and community-based organisations articulate local politics, public policies and urban development because they become progressively more and more a source of mobilisation of electoral support for those decision-makers who succeed in granting funding for virtuous projects, hence a good example of democratic legitimation takes place.

For what concerns problem definition, Hogwood and Gunn describe this term as encompassing “the processes by which an issue (problem, opportunity, or trend), having been recognized as such and placed on the public policy agenda, is perceived by various interested parties; further explored, articulated, and possibly quantified; and in some but not all cases, given an authoritative or at least provisionally acceptable definition in terms of its likely causes, components, and consequences”⁸⁴ (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984). In general, the procedures of public policy making have been described in terms of a logical consequentiality. This approach based on rationality coincides with the process of gathering many pieces of information and data, then a serious social condition gains public attention and is analysed in its details. After this, it is up to decision-makers to judge that problem and its causes responding in the most efficient way through means such as new legislation. In particular, attention is not unlimited: it continues until the problem exists (or until an effective problem definition dominates the others) and after that, it simply decreases or shifts towards other concerns. It must be specified that reality and empirical evidence tend to systematically contradict this perspective. In fact, it cannot be that only objective factors concur in defining a problem (and consequently its perception of urgency), but there must be other conditions favouring or limiting the importance of an issue and the attention devoted to it.

Among the factors influencing the amount of arbitrariness in dealing with public matters and structuring opinions about how worrying they can be, it is possible to mention the intensity of the effort in drawing attention to a certain problem, the openness of leaders to recognise that problem, and the importance of contending problems. However, uncertainty and a plurality of interpretations often remain for what regards the manner in which a particular problem will be interpreted. As far as problem definition is concerned, “cognitive psychologists distinguish between “general” and “phenomenal” realities. The former refers to the actual bases of

existence. The latter refers to “the constellation of thoughts, perceptions, and feelings” which make up each person's “constructed reality”⁸⁵ (Wegner and Vallacher, 1977). These important intellectual contributions help us understand that with reference to a given public issue, only a part of it can be understood unambiguously by everyone, while a relevant remaining part is bound to be disputed, altered and varied according to divergent perceptions of it. Thus, problem definition may as well be defined as problem description and applying this insight politically, it is possible to state that “we each create our own reality. and this is nowhere more true than in the way we identify problems or issues, and interpret and relate them to our mental map of some larger situation”⁸⁶ (Hogwood and Gunn, 1984) and this is also reflected and strictly related to how debaters are able to project their own vision supporting their cause. The various aspects that inevitably make up the identity of the problem concurrently and with a hierarchy of importance among them reveal the complexity of policy-making and of the actions needed to tackle public issues. Responding in the best way to social demands means to favour a particular vision of reality: in a situation of many possible causes and influences, choosing certain factors instead of others is not a neutral action and is instead crucial in reaching solutions.

5.2) Agenda access

It is precisely the process of agenda access (and agenda-setting in particular) that is interesting now, since it helps us to understand even better the dynamics of urban governance. We can distinguish among three types: “the public agenda refers to the set of issues that are most salient to citizens and voters, the governmental agenda consists of the issues that are up for discussion in governmental institutions such as legislatures and executive agencies, and the decision agenda is the narrower set of issues about which governmental officials are poised to make a decision”⁸⁷ (Pralle, 2009). Surely “highly salient issues are more likely to move onto the decision agendas of governmental institutions”⁸⁸ (Pralle, 2009), but then a stumbling block that is often insurmountable is “realizing the cost of significant progress [followed by] gradual decline of intense public interest”⁸⁹ (Downs, 1972). Hence, inside the same public agenda that is the one continuously in contact with the perceptions of citizens, opinion leaders and community notables the attention devoted to certain issues may not be sufficient (or sufficiently focused) to make it reach the next step, the governmental agenda where political discussion may take place. This may depend on how directly a certain phenomenon concerns people, how severe it may be, what its incidence might be and maybe also how novel it could be. In fact, especially regarding this last aspect, it should be noted that the novelty of an unprecedented situation is always striking, but in the long run temporary solutions can

become permanent and people may tend to get used to them. Otherwise, especially “when a feasible solution is attached to what the public and policymakers perceive as an important public problem, and when political conditions are amenable to change, a policy window opens. Policy entrepreneurs must then seize the opportunity and push for government action”⁹⁰ (Pralle, 2009). A policy window is the best event that can take place, because it consequently implies that from the public agenda a certain problem (or a set of problems) can reach the governmental agenda and hopefully the decision one, too.

In the interaction between society and public institutions some limits emerge, such as administrative inertia, the bureaucracy's need to follow strict rules and procedures as well as its necessity of collecting standardised data, trying to quantify also some measures that might be hard to reduce to a mere quantitative aspect. On the other hand, as far as citizens are concerned, it can be misleading and counterproductive to consider certain public issues as completely on or off agendas. In this regard, a more useful approach would be instead to conceive urban problems (and their perception) as covering points on a continuum, with peaks of attention that will be followed by periods of less sensitivity towards the subject. This would be a good approach because it would firstly recognise that the salience of given issues cannot be eternal and that the flow of social modifications is continuous. More specifically, drawing on these intuitions, another important aspect to bear in mind is that concerning the agendas (be it the public one, the governmental one or the decision one) each of them has a “carrying capacity”⁹¹ (Pralle, 2009) that restricts the quantity of public problems that it can deal with simultaneously, thus establishing competition among issues for a place. In these cases, tools such as strategic framing, saliency and the adoption of user-friendly terms in trying to get access to the agendas can really make a difference (and when dealing with environmental or health issues the correct emphasis on scientific consensus about the urgency of a certain problem can equally be fundamental).

5.3) Policy choice

What has been shown is that every effort in giving salience to public issues is aimed at reaching the governmental agenda and ultimately the decision one. If the political arena for public intervention can be limited to a struggle between expanders voicing a problem and containers minimizing that same problem, the status quo is usually favourable to the latter group, whereas some extreme focusing events visualising the negative impacts of certain public problems will instead support the reasons of the former group. Regarding specifically the dynamics of policy choice, it must be clarified that this step comes only after the real

importance of a given phenomenon has been publicly recognised by local communities and after the political debate has reached maturity and clarity: it cannot be that just some isolated manifestations of changes can give rise to direct and immediate choice without reasoned confrontation. On the contrary, the instances of ignoring certain social questions may be motivated by many factors: when, for example, “they are not visible or expressed (for example, nonvisibility of consequences, long-term consequences only, lack of political representation of the disadvantaged groups), or because no mode of state intervention proves feasible and consensual (for example, negative electoral impacts, absence of political-administrative implementation bodies, the inability to influence the behaviour of certain private actors in reality)”⁹² (Knoepfel, Larrue, Varone and Hill, 2007).

Taking this into account, apart from standard policy choice made by decision-makers, concrete spaces of repoliticisation and of direct choice by citizens may succeed in arising. Giving importance to their opinions by involving them directly, citizen juries and deliberative polls have already been cited as virtuous examples. Besides this, an interesting platform regarding these issues is Participedia, “a global network and crowdsourcing platform for researchers, educators, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and anyone interested in public participation and democratic innovations”⁹³ (Participedia, 2021). Documenting thousands of best practices around the world for what surrounds the topic of democratic participation, this website provides invaluable food for thought and very useful contents. There the tools of problem-solving (that is referred to private, individual problems) are transposed to the collective dimension and to choice, what could be called policy choice, or public policy in the general term encompassing the act of choosing and of implementing the solutions according to the decisions taken. More precisely, as far as the definition of a public policy is concerned, “the constituent elements of a public policy comprise: a solution to a public problem, the existence of target groups at the root of a public problem, intentional coherence at the very least, the existence of several decisions and activities, an intervention programme, the key role of public actors, the existence of formalised measures, decisions and activities that impose constraints”⁹⁴ (Knoepfel, Larrue, Varone and Hill, 2007).

6) Case studies: Rimini, Bologna and Rome

6.1) Rimini

6.1.1) Introduction

From previously a polluter among cities to later an example of “best practice cited by the UN”⁹⁵ for Sustainable Development Goal 14: Life Below Water. How is it possible that the

most visited coastal city in Italy has lived with the discharges of wastewater into the sea for decades and yet it managed to attract millions of tourists every year? In order to answer this question, a deeper and more complex analysis would be necessary, but this part can be worthy of attention for its explanatory purpose concentrating on a public policy not only from the point of view of mere results, but also taking into consideration civil society participation. Nowadays Rimini is one of the most sustainable cities in Italy, also winning prizes for its public works.⁹⁶ Located in the centre north of Italy by the Adriatic sea, it is also the fifth city of the country with most tourists every year (more than Naples or Turin)⁹⁷.

However, its good reputation clashed stridently with the serious (and equally well known) problem of wastewater management, sewage treatment and, in lack of it, consequent water pollution. Hence, here I will firstly try to tackle comprehensively this issue, examining the importance of the civil society and its involvement in decision-making processes. My focus will be on the civic association who advocated for this issue, Basta Merda in Mare (BMiM)⁹⁸, which managed to “emphasise the costs of doing nothing”⁹⁹ (Pralle, 2009). Then I will go through some stages of the policy cycle, in particular: problem framing, agenda-setting and implementation. My attention will be limited to these three fundamental phases because I consider them as the most relevant for the research purpose, they are the most interesting ones that can be problematized and, rather than being just described, they can be instrumental to raise explanations. I will not devote a great part of the study to policy formulation, since it is dense of technicalities and specificities of an engineering nature, and the same logic applies to policy evaluation and monitoring, specifically because the latter is still taking place. Surely, the crucial elements leading to policy success were the involvement of the civil society and the openness of decision-makers to listen and to find innovative solutions. Furthermore, it is proper to specify why the civil society was not involved in other stages, namely for simple lack of expertise: when engineers and urban planners went to delve into hydraulic calculations, project revisions and specific improvements, the suggestions and ideas of simple citizens had already been widely listened to and integrated into the policies.

The chosen time span here is between 2011 and 2020 (even if for BMiM I will mention episodes from 2000 onwards): so 2011 is important because a violent storm hit Rimini on 6 June 2011 and it strained the city's sewage system causing “flooding of wastewater on the streets”¹⁰⁰. 2020 instead is chosen because in July 2020 there was the total completion of the second waterfront terrace, of the two underground tanks collecting water and the reopening of Piazzale Kennedy, the square above the most famous stretch of the Safe Bathing Master Plan (SBMP and before SBP, Safe Bathing Plan)¹⁰¹ deliberated by the Municipality of Rimini.

6.1.2) Decades of wastewater discharged into the sea: Basta Merda in Mare!

In order to analyse exhaustively the specific issue, some contextualization is required, as well as concepts and theories through which I can explain the different dynamics: I will focus on problem framing by the civil society and in particular its involvement in decision-making processes. In Rimini, the issue of wastewater has been documented for decades: the oldest track is a newspaper article dating back to 1990¹⁰². Five years later, a complaint to the Prosecutor of Rimini was made and it was addressed to the then mayor of the city, responsible for correct information about the status of sea water. After he was sentenced, the Municipality was obliged to expose bathing prohibitions when the conditions required it. Despite this, only “the symptoms of a social problem constitute[d] the starting point [...] of a debate on the need for a policy”¹⁰³ (Knoepfel et al., 2007) and here the starting point came from an association: Basta Merda in Mare.

Founded in 2000, its members organised a real “mobilisation of bias”¹⁰⁴ (Schattschneider, 1960): they published books, made videos, spots of complaint, sit-ins, and on 11 August 2001 they even collected a bucket of wastewater which had just arrived to the sea and they brought it downtown, exposing it at the Municipality. For what regards social change, Knoepfel and others inform us that it may “not give rise to policies, mainly because they are not visible or expressed”¹⁰⁵ (Knoepfel et al., 2007). Evidently, this was not the case here, where the activists managed to “emphasise specific local impacts and personal experience”¹⁰⁶ (Pralle, 2009), so just doing what would be ideal for effective problem framing.

In this regard, investigating what types of undesirable situations could motivate governmental intervention, what is sure is that an unattended public value would be a key determinant. After a certain policy cycle, an issue can be framed differently, the problem definition may be altered significantly: here the phenomenon of wastewater offload into the sea was initially framed as a minor health problem without any focus on the public value of having a clean sea. In particular, the sewage system was of an undifferentiated type (i.e. with black and white waters ending in the same pipes) so in very rainy days, the drains and the purification system stopped working at full capacity and wastewater used to flow into the sea. Obviously, the bathing bans imposed by the Prosecutor were not enough for BMiM: since a real “theory of social change”¹⁰⁷ (Muller, 1985, 1995; Mény and Thoenig, 1989) is characterised by causality dynamics, the reasons that drive solutions can be very different, especially here if they were conceived as avoiding minimal risks (initial opinions of the local administration) or rather as vast environmental issues, as advocated by the association. Again on bathing bans: the signs were often barely visible, hence, in August 2007 the volunteers of the association cordoned

off 100 meters of the beach with a measuring tape, making it evident that on that day the bathing ban was valid, owing to dirty sea water. Precisely since that moment there was the true involvement of the association in decision-making processes: to protect the health of bathers, red and white flags were created specifically to signal bathing bans, which were in turn increased in number, made clearer, bigger and translated in many languages.

But to further explain how we got to the agenda setting, it is useful to add other reasons for public action: ethics and science. Surely “all policies aim to resolve a public problem [...] Thus, they represent the response [...] to a social reality that is deemed politically unacceptable”¹⁰⁸ (Knoepfel et al., 2007) and the refusal of the status quo was also of a moral nature. In fact, one of the most famous Riminese citizens, Nadia Urbinati, Professor of Political Theory at Columbia University, undertook to spread a culture of respect for the environment and convinced many by citing arguments of ethics and sustainability. If policy framing keeps actors inside or outside the individuation of solutions, then strategic framing is to be considered as such if communication practices and relational skills are used wisely, as it was done here, including more and more actors in the participatory process, in the “advocacy coalition framework”¹⁰⁹ (Sabatier, 1988). After all, it is always fundamental to “insert a moral and ethical perspective into the debate”¹¹⁰ (Pralle, 2009).

For what regards science, “if people trust that scientists themselves agree and are knowledgeable about [an] issue, they should be [...] more disposed toward considering it a priority”¹¹¹ (Pralle, 2009). For Rimini a good example were the findings of Arpa, the Regional agency for prevention and the environment, when analysing the sewer drains into the sea, defining them as a “bacteriological bomb”.¹¹² Thus, slowly and with constant demonstrations, the focus shifted and the problem definition acquired more nuances, becoming also a touristic-economic concern for the continuation of Rimini’s prosperity.

As a consequence, there was a real turning point, on 18 February 2010: the association was accepted in an audition at the City Council of Rimini and there the foundations were laid for the Safe Bathing Plan (then to become Master Plan). At this point I have investigated what Downs would call the “pre-problem stage” and the “alarmed discovery”¹¹³ (Downs, 1972) and from that moment on, the “salience of the issue”¹¹⁴ (McDonald, 2009) would only start to increase: the civil society was involved in the Forum for the Environment and also included in all the main operational conferences that would follow.

6.1.3) Rimini’s rebirth: the Safe Bathing Master Plan as a winning strategy

So far I have explained what was the process and the successful problem framing leading to the full recognition of the issue and consequent public action. After this, there was the concretization of “the largest investment in sewer rehabilitation currently present in Italy”¹¹⁵, but the details of this plan are still to be investigated thoroughly, especially for what regards agenda-setting and implementation. The ambitious project that allowed Rimini to be the first coastal city in Italy to definitively solve the problem of wastewater discharges into the sea¹¹⁶ was the Safe Bathing Master Plan (SBMP), mainly consisting of the restructuring and enlargement of the sewage system, the construction of two tanks located 40 meters below ground level and the “doubling of the wastewater treatment plant of Santa Giustina”.¹¹⁷

But why was the issue of wastewater not deemed as a public problem needing a policy before that long-awaited project? As already mentioned, the framing that introduced the issue of wastewater as a public problem helped it to get into the decision agenda, but in trying to raise explanations, it is important to remember that “policymakers also learn about problems through dramatic focusing events that grab their attention”¹¹⁸ (Pralle, 2009) And that is precisely what happened in Rimini with the violent storm that hit the city in 2011: on newspapers the fact is vividly reported: “Rimini, 6 June 2011 - A storm hit Rimini. Serious damage has been reported [...] The flooding was caused by an electronic fault in a bulkhead that should have opened and discharged the exceptional influx of rain [...] into the sea. Failure to open implied water overflowing from the manholes, flooding hotels, houses and shops.”¹¹⁹ Hence, the exceptionality of this event may well be a further reason that urged for public intervention. The latter is “at the root of the conception of real public policies”¹²⁰ (Knoepfel et al., 2007) given that in order to solve a private problem the tools of problem solving are sufficient, but when we deal with a public problem those approaches are not valid anymore and a public policy needs to take place. In particular, “a public policy is the product of activities aimed at the resolution of public problems by political actors whose relationships are structured. The entire process evolves over time”¹²¹ (Lemieux, 1995). If we ask why the policy was successful (and before it, agenda setting), great part of the merit goes to the local administration, because they realized the aforementioned cost of significant progress, but also the cost “of doing nothing”¹²² (Pralle, 2009). In their words: “if untreated or inadequately treated wastewater is discharged directly into the environment, costs are generated [and] potential benefits are lost.”¹²³ (Commissioners Montini, Rossi Di Schio et al., 2017).

In the case of Italy, implementation of public policies is often insufficient or inadequate for European standards: there have been numerous infringement procedures against Italy regarding purifiers¹²⁴ in 2014 and on sewage systems and water protection¹²⁵ in 2018. Here it is necessary to mention the “EU water framework directive (WFD) [which] strives to achieve

‘good ecological status’ in EU waters [...] However, the implementation of environmental quality standards (EQS) [...] is in the end a task for national and sub-national level actors.”¹²⁶ (Söderberg, 2016). This last specification is essential for explaining the dynamics under study: who is in charge of devising plans to achieve European goals? National and local administrations. In this regard, Larrue and Vlassopoulou, though for a different policy domain, write that “the modification of the network at national level took a long period of time. And the modification at local level will be much more difficult”¹²⁷. But in Rimini this very dynamic was reversed: the local dimension proved to be virtuous and effective, involving important stakeholders for the creation and financing of the public works: the Municipality of Rimini, HERA Group, Romagna Acque and AMIR. On the other hand, the national dimension did not intervene with resolute operations, but at least the Ministry of the Environment allocated 17 million euros¹²⁸ for the SBMP.

As a further contribution for explanation, “the [European] Commission [...] has also recognised that meeting the objectives of the WFD requires reducing water pollution [...] involving [e.g.] Waste Water Treatment”¹²⁹ (Söderberg, 2016) and regarding implementation this can be considered as another positive guidance that was followed. In fact, members of the local administration agree that “the main goal of a sewerage master plan is to avoid sanitary problems [...] reduce combined sewer overflows [...] improving the environmental quality both for inhabitants and tourists. [...] In the experience in Rimini, the iter for a new sewerage plan started [...] years ago, and in 2011 a new perspective has been chosen, together with a large involvement of the citizens in the decision making”¹³⁰ (Commissioners Montini, Rossi Di Schio et al., 2017). The fact that the new course of work started precisely in 2011 is not by chance, but rather corroborates the aforementioned elements of explanation: it was a few months after that famous 2010 City Council when BMiM was heard and 2011 also coincided with the year in which the storm hit the city.

“When a feasible solution is attached to what the public and policymakers perceive as an important public problem, and when political conditions are amenable to change, a policy window opens”¹³¹ (Pralle, 2009) and this was the case with the articulation of the SBP (and then SBMP). For the brief mention about policy formulation in its specificities, it is sufficient to clarify that wastewater treatment ranges “from smallscale onsite treatment to large-scale systems that serve complete urban areas”¹³² (van der Vleuten-Balkema, 2003) and the Santa Giustina purifier that was doubled thanks to the SBMP falls into the second category being the only one in Italy with membrane technology¹³³. Currently, the SBMP has been concretized with an investment of 154 million euros and without any implementation gaps (except for an addition of € 6.5 million to total costs). Why? Because the process of

coordination among all the involved actors was continuous and the role played by the civil society was not undervalued anymore, becoming crucial for the success of the Plan: after the closing of the river Ausa that discharged mixed water directly into the sea, there was the separation of the sewerage networks in Northern Rimini and finally the completion of the two underground tanks to accumulate excess water during violent storms.

6.1.4) Conclusion: associational life is not useless after all

We are told that “environmental goals are often overridden by economic and other societal goals”¹³⁴ (Söderberg, 2016), but this was not the case here. If the political arena for public intervention can be limited to a struggle between expanders voicing a problem and containers minimizing it, the case of Rimini can be again emblematic. Depending on problem definition, different tools of resolution may be identified: as long as wastewater flows into the sea were perceived as sporadic and negligible episodes that did not harm anyone (except the environment) the policies adopted were just temporary ones. Luckily, the new problem definition helped the citizens and the local administration to discover the new public value of having a clean sea and therefore to look for more long run solutions.

For the evidence that was gathered, the crucial elements leading to policy success were the involvement of the civil society and the openness of decision-makers to work with competent experts to find innovative solutions. There were initially some “filtering mechanisms”¹³⁵ (Knoepfel, 2007) such as to initially ignore the problem owing to lack of intervention instruments and little interest, but then “the intensity of issue advocacy [...] and the salience of competing problems”¹³⁶ (Lineberry, 1981) brought to the desired result.

Thus, what can be inferred from the previous explanations is that, along with objective factors, there is a very significant part of subjectivity: the perceived urgency of a problem depends on our ways of grasping the complexities of phenomena i.e. it is socially created. The elements that instead are unambiguously concrete are the public works as results of all these dynamics, where the civil society is not any more involved because at that stage all the concern is about specificities and technical improvements. In this regard, were the adopted policies really the best ones to solve the problem? Probably yes, and what is sure is that the framing of the social and environmental issue was determinant in the individuation of them.

The public works have been cited by the UN as a best practice, however some environmental activists are still not fully satisfied, owing to the fact that some drains discharging into the sea are still open, but they should be closed soon. As a last resort, if even the newly built tanks are not sufficient to contain the accumulated water, all the liquids will be pumped with large

pipes about a kilometer and a half from the coast, so that they have plenty of time to dilute and lose the organic load and bathing will not be banned even in that almost impossible situation.

Since my explanations cover specific parts of the implemented policy, they cannot fully clarify how certain technologies were developed for the SBMP and nor can they foresee how these will impact the lives of Riminese citizens, but this case showed that an effective organisation can previously frame an issue effectively and then solve it wisely. To conclude, I would argue that regarding urban sustainability transitions, cities will be (and already are) the “frontline for sustainability”¹³⁷ (Loorbach and Shiroyama, 2016) since the local level involves interactions with actors incentivizing sustainable practices and coping with unsustainable ones (our case) through participatory practices, knowledge co-production and context-specific types of information leading to social innovation.

6.2) Bologna

6.2.1) Introduction

Capital of the metropolitan city and of the Emilia-Romagna region, Bologna is located between the heart of the Po Valley and the mountains of the Tuscan-Emilian Apennines. City of art, culture and commerce with an efficient trade fair structure and a renowned manufacturing and motoring tradition, the city boasts the title of UNESCO Creative City of Music. It must also be mentioned that Bologna was the European Capital of Culture in 2000 and that it is home of the oldest university in the world, Alma Mater Studiorum, University of Bologna, which was founded in 1088. This study centre attracts tens of thousands of brilliant young minds and helps make Bologna a centre of innovation and development.

Then it is no wonder that in such a socially and culturally vibrant environment the local institutions and the local community continuously succeed in devising great administrative examples that can be followed by other municipalities in Italy. Studying in deep the tools that are available to a public body, in the Italian legal system the municipal master plan, for instance, should be cited. It is an urban planning instrument that regulates the building activity within a municipal area, which every Italian municipality must adopt in accordance with the law. Bologna is characterised by an excellent infrastructural network, a clear zoning of the municipal area and by innovative indications of spaces intended for public use. This last aspect is particularly interesting and deserves peculiar attention.

6.2.2) Participatory practices in Bologna

As far as spaces intended for public use are concerned, a flourishing of participatory practices and active citizenship are to be found in the territory of Bologna. One of these is the case study on Participedia.net regarding civic engagement and urban co-creation in Bologna (started in 2010 and still ongoing): “Since 2010 Bologna has increased the number and variety of ways citizens can collaborate with the Municipality to improve the urban commons. The result is a robust, multi-channel system of citizen engagement. [...] Bologna’s unique system of civic engagement uses a system of ‘collaboration agreements’ or ‘pacts’: agreements signed by the administration to provide funding and support to projects proposed and led by residents. The process is a hybrid of collaborative planning and participatory budgeting, including phases like project proposal submission, technical evaluation, project selection, funding allocation, and implementation”¹³⁸ (Participedia, 2021). The participatory planning framework that derives from this virtuous example is one that combines social innovation labs, collaboration agreements and participatory budgeting with the objective of granting citizens the possibility to shape the future of Bologna.

All residents are invited to submit project proposals, both as individuals or as groups, but their involvement would not be sufficient without an innovative regulatory adjustment by the Municipality of Bologna, such as the “Regulation on public collaboration between citizens and the city for the care and regeneration of urban communes”¹³⁹ passed in 2014. This regulation aims at promoting cooperation between the administration and citizens on the care and management of common goods defined by city officials as “the goods, tangible, intangible and digital, that citizens and the Administration, also through participative and deliberative procedures, recognize to be functional to the individual and collective wellbeing, activating consequently towards them...to share the responsibility with the Administration of their care or regeneration in order to improve the collective enjoyment”¹⁴⁰. All of this integrates in-depth meetings organised in the districts of Bologna, moments of discussion with associations, groups of the third sector, NGOs, private entities as well as proposals of projects. Bologna is thus home of urban commons, public spaces where residents and groups agree on an intervention of care and regeneration (squares, green spaces, abandoned buildings and similar infrastructures) and it is a great instance of repoliticisation of the urban life.

6.3) Rome

6.3.1) Introduction

Needless to say, Rome may be all that has been written so far, but bigger. Rome, Italian Roma, ancient and glorious city, capital of the metropolitan city of Roma as well as Roma province, capital of Lazio region, and historic capital of Italy since 1871. Rome is located in central Italy, on the Tiber River, more or less fifteen miles inland from the Tyrrhenian Sea.

Centuries ago it was the administrative heart and capital of the Roman Empire, which shaped culture and politics in the Western world (and beyond) leaving undoubtedly some very lasting influences thereafter. Furthermore, Rome is also the physical and spiritual seat of the Holy See (the Vatican) for the Roman Catholic Church, and the site of great artistic, architectural and intellectual masterpieces, making it deserve the name of Eternal City. In particular, Rome's historic centre is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, with wondrous buildings, millennial churches, sumptuous monuments and splendid statues. For sure, Rome is characterised by a hugely rich historical heritage and by a cosmopolitan atmosphere, electing it as one of the most beautiful and one of the most visited European capitals, exceptionally famous all over the world.

At an urban level, architecturally and socially, Rome presents some contrasts: as in every city, development and well-being are not spread equally in every corner of the urban area, but here particularly the differences are evident both because the territory is strikingly vast and also because the majestic palaces, basilicas and avenues of the centre are not replicable elsewhere. Thus a first structural difference exists between the centre and the periphery. Moreover, an administrative organisation that divides the city in more or less equally inhabited districts (*municipi*) cannot make up for certain deficiencies of property and wealth: taking into consideration the First District, a huge disparity remains between the richest part of the society and the poorest one. In particular, this district is the one showing the deepest contrasts in these terms: people from 'good families' have numerous old, spacious and luxurious houses or apartments and this situation coexists with the one of many poor families or homeless people. Hence, the need for solidarity and mutual help is definitely present here and it is precisely the case I am going to analyse now.

6.3.2) Community practices in Rome

“We are a community. A supportive community, which leaves no one behind but adapts to change and protects the most vulnerable, the people we love and those we don't know, and also ourselves”¹⁴¹ (Alfonsi and Guido, 2020). With these words the municipal officials introduce the community practices that have been implemented in the First District and among all of these there is one that will set a virtuous standard for years to come: the “Community Pact”¹⁴². The Community Pact was devised by the local administration of the First District and it coincides with the integration of many different communitarian services and practical aid. The solidarity initiative collects over seventy adhesions, including the Community of Sant'Egidio, Acli Roma, Croce Rossa Italiana, Emergency and others. The

goal is to articulate a stable territorial network able to be resilient and close to the real needs of the residents.

Undoubtedly, all people who are already fragile risk experiencing a significant loosening of the networks of inclusion and welfare, so it is necessary to give structural and long-term responses, aimed at the recovery of the economy, work and development, but also taking the opportunity to redesign a more just and balanced recovery that leaves no one behind. In order to be really supportive and responsive to emergencies, municipal services, the third sector, neighbourhood solidarity networks, clubs, trade unions and religious offices are not enough on their own. Without a collaboration on the ground, each of these segments will not be able to include the need for listening and helping that comes from citizenship. More precisely, the Community Pact gives the innovative possibility to systematise skills and human resources, integrating professionalism and available spaces, making the services complementary to each other, sharing projects and voluntary work for the common good: associations, formal and informal committees organise responses together rather than alone and being able to count on the resources of other groups they all contribute to the cohesion of a community.

For what regards policy-making, the process was something between a top-down approach starting from local institutions and a bottom-up approach from the requests of citizens and associations, it was mostly a mediation among the parties: the needs of the residents were increasing and thus the real impulse came from the First District trying to find effective solutions, which would not have been sufficient without the concrete help of the civil society. After all, welfare systems are not only an economic issue, but also a structural one having systemic limits, since services are sometimes devised in a way that does not respond to current demands, especially new ones in the light of the pandemic. For instance, when an applicant asks the social secretariat for financial aid, the public body encounters administrative difficulties in helping him/her or the family if they have a job, a house, but they still do not manage to live adequately. Thus, sometimes governing instruments are missing and a participatory process involving the associations that could help concretely was necessary. No working tables were set up, but rather a more direct series of formal adhesions, a simple request for membership, proposing the activities already carried out (and making them available to other realities), then completing the offer of services integrating with similar groups and lastly there were also instances of completely new services being offered as a result of fruitful collaboration between the parties.

One last aspect to mention, the First District has peculiar demographic characteristics and in terms of mere numbers it is comparable to an average municipality, such as that of Rimini for example (149 thousand inhabitants in Rimini, 186 thousand in the First District of Rome). What remains without a clear answer is thus the fact whether or not the Community Pact could be replicable throughout the vast territory of Roma Capitale or if it can be a virtuous model only if it remains confined to more manageable numbers. More time and more study would be necessary, but what is sure is that similar initiatives are traceable in other districts, such as the solidarity actions in the Eighth District and in general the whole Municipality of Rome could start experimentations from all those associations and committees that are homogeneously present in its territory.

7) Conclusion

In conclusion, what can be inferred from the theoretical framework and the case studies that were analysed is that cities are facing great challenges, especially new and unprecedented ones, but at the same time the pandemic represents an opportunity, that is the one to develop the urban space in a more reticular and democratic way. Social inclusion and territorial cohesion as non-negotiable objectives should be placed at the centre of urbanisation processes and the policy choices under investigation in this dissertation unambiguously go in this direction. From the point of view of political sociology, the urban dimension does not represent a space of lesser importance than the more relevant national dynamics, rather, it should be understood as a concrete replication at the local level of those same national dynamics, localised in a more direct contact with citizens (and active voters).

Precisely on this last aspect of citizens as active voters, the social context from which the dissertation starts is political disengagement and the crisis of popular involvement, evident manifestations of depoliticisation dynamics. Besides this, less electoral participation, less party membership as well as more electoral volatility at the same time would all concur in highlighting the fact that a decline of politics as it has been known so far seems inevitable. Nevertheless, modern democracy is not inconceivable save in terms of political parties and many paragraphs of documented evidence help us asserting that we are witnessing a transition from a depoliticised society to a less politicised one, or even to a repoliticised one. In fact, repoliticisation processes characterise urban politics and the administrative action of local governments and municipalities. Urban resilience and innovative urban governance lead us to the conclusion that new participatory examples are concretising in Italy and that the interactions between the two sides (society and local institutions) are of a positive nature. Fathoming the specificities of policy-making, ranging from problem definition, to agenda

access and lastly to policy choice, the case studies of Rimini, Bologna and Rome respectively represent environmental, participatory and community practices that virtuously revive the social fabric of the city and repoliticise urban politics in an era of depoliticisation.

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Riassunto

La mia tesi in sociologia politica prova a indagare le cause, gli effetti e le manifestazioni concrete di fenomeni come l'allontanamento dalla politica, il disinteresse verso la cosa pubblica, la minore affluenza alle urne: in una parola, i processi di depoliticizzazione. L'elaborato ne delinea una definizione, contestualmente a quella di democrazia, e presenta come primo elemento il contesto sociale. Storicamente i grandi partiti di massa erano in grado di attrarre milioni di persone ed erano profondamente radicati nella società e nelle sue strutture, sia per maggiore polarizzazione e motivazione ideologica sia per l'identificazione di classe. Oggi una nuova rilevanza potrebbe invece essere data alla vita associativa, alla società civile e al suo ruolo fondamentale per la comunità. Facendo tesoro dell'elaborazione di studiosi come Elisabeth S. Clemens o Robert Putnam si riscontra che un tessuto civico, organizzativo e relazionale più denso porta anche ad un sistema democratico più di qualità, a maggiore partecipazione politica ed addirittura a governi considerati più competenti. In effetti, seppur in un contesto di generale sfiducia e minore partecipazione (soprattutto nelle democrazie occidentali), l'aggregazione e l'articolazione degli interessi sono tanto più efficaci

quanto più è fitta la rete di associazioni, comitati e gruppi ramificati sui territori. Si tratta anche di un esempio di legittimazione verso i decisori politici, chiamati a rappresentare le istanze di singoli cittadini e cittadine non in una maniera mediata soltanto tramite l'atto del voto, ma anche sancita con l'impegno ad ottenere precisi risultati, rispettare certe condizioni ed onorare il volere popolare. Infatti, altra componente importante nella grande partecipazione democratica di un tempo è la teoria dell'azione collettiva, la quale promuove l'attivismo incoraggiando le potenzialità del gruppo rispetto al singolo e fornendo incentivi esclusivamente a membri e attivisti. Tuttavia, questi stimoli oggi spesso non sono più sufficienti e se i cittadini non partecipano ai processi fondamentali della democrazia non corroborano quelle stesse strutture e istituzioni.

Chiaramente, chi abita quelle istituzioni è la politica, nella sua forma più tradizionale rappresentata dai partiti. Secondo Peter Mair, esistono due dimensioni fondamentali riguardo alla crisi del coinvolgimento popolare: la politica fatta sul campo e quella pubblica. Per la prima, l'indifferenza non è unidirezionale, dai cittadini verso i partiti politici, bensì è da parte sia della cittadinanza che della classe politica: si stanno allontanando l'una dall'altra ed è in questo senso che c'è uno svuotamento dello spazio in cui interagiscono i cittadini e i loro rappresentanti. Il secondo aspetto è quello che opera a livello di politica pubblica e può essere osservato nella crescente accettazione e legittimazione di modalità decisionali non politiche o depoliticizzate. Tra le manifestazioni importanti di questa tendenza vi è la crescente importanza di agenzie sovranazionali e internazionali. Questi due vettori che si rafforzano a vicenda lungo il divario politico (o piuttosto si indeboliscono a vicenda) possono di fatto condurre da un lato all'alternativa populista e dall'altro a quella tecnocratica. In particolare, la sfiducia per la democrazia e i suoi meccanismi può essere intesa sotto molti punti di vista diversi, ma un eccessivo apprezzamento per il populismo implica il governo della maggioranza senza la certezza della tutela dei diritti della minoranza, mentre la tecnocrazia implica che coloro che hanno il potere non devono rispondere delle proprie azioni in quanto ritenute oggettivamente le migliori. Dunque entrambe le forme alternative alla democrazia rappresentativa e partitica rinunciano al principio di accountability. Tornando ai livelli di affluenza e partecipazione democratica, il fatto che essi non sempre registrino un calo netto è talvolta citato come prova di un ininterrotto impegno popolare per la politica convenzionale. Tuttavia, le informazioni disponibili indicano tutte lo stesso trend di minore partecipazione, minore interesse e non si tratta di un fenomeno recente: infatti, il calo dell'affluenza risale agli anni Ottanta e Novanta.

Dall'indifferenza verso il voto si passa poi alla volatilità del voto. Le ipotesi si focalizzano sul fatto che gli elettori siano sempre più incoerenti e incerti di prima e questa osservazione non

rimane comunque indiscussa: al contrario, studiosi come Bennett sostengono che anche se la partecipazione politica convenzionale può essere in declino, chi continua a partecipare mostra stabilità e coerenza nel processo della scelta di voto e nella formazione di proprie opinioni. Si sottolinea anche come con l'avvento delle nuove tecnologie si sia consolidato un continuo cambiamento verso una professionalizzazione delle campagne elettorali. Dal momento che più cittadini sono disinteressati, potenzialmente più elettori possono essere convinti, pertanto, l'opinione pubblica è sempre monitorata e le dinamiche della comunicazione sono sapientemente elaborate da esperti. Arriviamo così all'ultima dimensione fondamentale della crisi: l'appartenenza ad un partito. Ovviamente i partiti a loro volta sono cambiati, alleggerendo le responsabilità di avere una tessera e accettando tutti i gradi di partecipazione, molti hanno aggiornato le loro strategie di reclutamento e offrono percorsi più facili per entrare nei loro ranghi ed organi decisionali. In alcuni partiti, ai simpatizzanti vengono concessi praticamente gli stessi diritti dei tesserati, con costi però nulli o inferiori, appunto. Rimane dunque la perplessità sul perché qualcuno dovrebbe fare l'ulteriore passo di unirsi a tali partiti come membro a pieno titolo piuttosto che rimanere più liberamente un semplice simpatizzante. Un ultimo aspetto da citare è quello che riguarda le associazioni, le organizzazioni legate a partiti politici, sindacati, cooperative religiose e tutti gli spazi associativi simili: la crisi del coinvolgimento popolare colpisce in misura diversa, ma comunque significativa, anche queste strutture sociali.

Da una società depoliticizzata a una meno politicizzata: è indubbiamente vero che i partiti politici rappresentano la spina dorsale delle strutture istituzionali e sociali su cui si basa la dimensione pubblica. Tuttavia, la collettività e l'attenzione al bene comune hanno progressivamente trovato (e stanno ancora sperimentando) nuove piattaforme partecipative e situazioni in cui è possibile canalizzare la propria azione. Soprattutto negli ultimi anni, la democrazia può essere pensata anche in termini di movimenti urbani, comitati civici, movimenti ideologici, associazioni e organizzazioni senza scopo di lucro. Le istituzioni e le organizzazioni politiche sono progressivamente sempre meno considerate come i soggetti che elaborano le risposte alle richieste dei cittadini, poiché tali richieste sono rivolte a diversi attori o possono non essere affatto articolate per indifferenza. Pertanto, Foa e Mounk descrivono questo fenomeno come un deconsolidamento democratico, ma è anche possibile essere meno allarmanti e si può sostenere che comunque la democrazia ad oggi non presenta competitor seri o alternative immediatamente realizzabili. Secondo De Blasio e Sorice, le risposte ai suddetti segnali di crisi possono essere raggruppate in tre grandi tendenze: la prima è rappresentata dall'aumento dell'apatia sociale con la crisi della rappresentanza, in altre parole, si acuisce la crisi di legittimità del sistema democratico, sempre più percepito come

illusorio. La seconda tendenza è speculare alla prima e si traduce in una richiesta di maggior controllo da parte dei cittadini delle istituzioni rappresentative. La terza tendenza consiste nella richiesta di nuove forme di partecipazione politica e queste ultime quasi sempre mantengono un forte radicamento verso i valori della democrazia, come le iniziative dal basso promosse dai cittadini, i movimenti per la giustizia globale e le iniziative locali spontanee. Di conseguenza, si può affermare che da una società meno politicizzata ci si muove verso una società ripoliticizzata: sono molte le dimensioni socio-spaziali utili alla ripoliticizzazione della società, ad esempio i movimenti urbani, i comitati civici, i movimenti ideologici, le associazioni e le organizzazioni senza scopo di lucro rappresentano a vari livelli la possibilità di rilanciare la partecipazione politica e di politicizzare dinamiche sociali e conflitti. La cittadinanza attiva in una comunità comporta uguali diritti e doveri per tutti e tale comunità è vincolata da rapporti orizzontali di reciprocità e cooperazione, non da rapporti verticali di autorità e dipendenza. Al contempo Wilson e Swyngedouw asseriscono che il principale paradigma di intervento è quello ambientale, ma la politica non è più credibile e non è pronta a rifiutare le leggi del mercato. Si potrebbe però confutare una tale tesi focalizzandosi sul fatto che la dimensione urbana non è meno importante di quella nazionale ed anzi può incidere più concretamente e va considerata per comprendere fenomeni più ampi, come quelli ambientali che sono stati citati prima. Più precisamente, le dinamiche locali dei movimenti sociali e dei comitati sono al centro della produzione e riproduzione di questi grandi eventi di natura globale, politicizzando i conflitti sociali e trasmettendo modi di interpretare il mondo. Ci possono essere almeno due prospettive analitiche per gli studi urbani, due diversi approcci per studiare il contesto cittadino: il primo è concepire la città come oggetto di politiche pubbliche, il secondo tende a vederla come soggetto politico. Con ciascuno dei due approcci, soprattutto con il secondo, i cittadini partecipano all'individuazione delle priorità politiche perché sentono di poter incidere concretamente. La risposta dei governi locali è dunque primariamente improntata su questa collaborazione, sullo strutturare spazi pubblici vivibili e che rientrino nell'ottica della resilienza urbana. Iniziative di bilancio partecipativo, innovazione democratica, democrazia digitale sono solo alcuni dei tanti esempi implementati dai comuni per decentralizzare, mettere al centro le persone, ma anche riterritorializzare le dimensioni dell'azione amministrativa. Viene infatti incoraggiata la creazione di comitati locali così come la formazione di gruppi civici per la cura e rigenerazione dei beni comuni urbani. Le città saranno il luogo in cui la maggior parte della popolazione mondiale vivrà entro il ventunesimo secolo e sono già il luogo in cui viene prodotta la maggior parte del PIL e dove avvengono più consumi. La governance del contesto urbano diviene dunque fondamentale e può essere citata come esempio virtuoso nell'applicazione di obiettivi globali (quelli ad esempio dell'Agenda 2030 dell'ONU) nella dimensione locale. La resilienza urbana

comunque va analizzata non solo alla luce della sostenibilità e dell'ambiente, ma anche in relazione al tessuto sociale: è urgente puntare sulla ricostruzione di città policentriche, con luoghi fisici più interconnessi, riorganizzando la spazialità del contesto urbano secondo una logica ben precisa di governance urbana e cooperazione tra cittadini e istituzioni. L'inclusione sociale, la coesione territoriale, la giustizia ambientale come valori non negoziabili possono essere posti al centro dei processi di urbanizzazione per colmare i vari gap democratici esplicitati in precedenza. Per quello che potrebbe riguardare una riflessione sui poteri amministrativi, le città hanno bisogno di strumenti normativi, potere e autonomia per attuare al meglio gli obiettivi che si pongono. Pertanto, i comuni e le istituzioni locali in generale potrebbero risolvere il problema della partecipazione concedendo qualche tipo di beneficio o aiuto ai cittadini che si distinguono per comportamenti positivi di impegno per la città. Oltre a questo, un altro modo per premiare i cittadini può essere quello di dare importanza alle loro opinioni coinvolgendoli direttamente: con iniziative di coprogettazione partecipata, sedi deliberative e bilanci partecipativi. Indubbiamente, le azioni efficaci svolte nel contesto urbano possono anche essere qualcosa di più di iniziative semi-private che vengono poi trasposte in città diverse. Può invece esistere una vera logica di cooperazione pubblica e di condivisione delle migliori pratiche convergendo in una governance urbana innovativa. In questo caso si possono creare dinamiche sinergiche e il ruolo delle istituzioni locali diventa cruciale: le città si rivelano non solo oggetto di politiche pubbliche o luoghi di attuazione delle politiche nazionali, ma diventano veri e propri soggetti politici che favoriscono il cambiamento. Inoltre, una definizione di co-governance potrebbe riassumere gli aspetti della gestione dei beni comuni urbani con una prospettiva che va oltre il classico approccio di governance pubblica o pubblica/privata. In effetti, una definizione corretta implica la cooperazione tra numerosi stakeholder: innovatori sociali, autorità pubbliche, aziende, organizzazioni di volontariato e istituzioni culturali. Per ciò che più specificatamente concerne le interazioni tra le due parti (società e istituzioni locali) la definizione dei problemi urbani è il primo importante aspetto da indagare. Hogwood e Gunn descrivono questo termine come comprendente i processi attraverso i quali un problema, essendo stato riconosciuto come tale e inserito nell'agenda politica, viene percepito dalle varie parti interessate, come viene articolato e possibilmente quantificato, con l'identificazione di eventuali cause, componenti e conseguenze. In generale, le procedure di elaborazione delle politiche pubbliche sono state descritte in termini di consequenzialità logica. Questo approccio basato sulla razionalità coincide con il processo di raccolta di molte informazioni e dati, conseguentemente ai quali una grave condizione sociale guadagna l'attenzione del pubblico e viene analizzata nei dettagli. Tuttavia, rimangono spesso incertezze e una pluralità di interpretazioni per quanto riguarda il modo in cui un particolare problema verrà interpretato.

Per ciò che si riferisce alla definizione di un problema, gli psicologi cognitivi distinguono tra realtà generali e realtà fenomeniche. La prima si riferisce alle basi effettive dell'esistenza di un dato oggetto o evento, la seconda si riferisce alla complessità di pensieri, percezioni e sentimenti che costituiscono la realtà costruita (fenomenica) di ogni persona. Questi importanti contributi intellettuali ci aiutano a capire che con riferimento a una determinata questione pubblica, solo una parte di essa può essere compresa in modo univoco da tutti, mentre una parte rimanente (e rilevante) è destinata ad essere contestata e modificata nel tempo secondo percezioni divergenti di essa. È proprio il processo di accesso all'agenda che è interessante ora, poiché aiuta a comprendere ancora meglio le dinamiche della governance urbana. Sicuramente le questioni altamente salienti hanno maggiori probabilità di accedere alle agende decisionali delle istituzioni governative, ma poi un ostacolo che è spesso insormontabile è capire il costo di progressi significativi col conseguente e graduale declino dell'interesse pubblico. Quindi, all'interno della stessa agenda pubblica che è quella continuamente in contatto con le percezioni di cittadini e opinion leader di una comunità, l'attenzione dedicata a certe tematiche può non essere sufficiente per raggiungere il passo successivo, la vera e propria agenda di governo locale in cui si possono svolgere discussioni politiche

Nell'interazione tra società e istituzioni pubbliche emergono alcuni limiti, come l'inerzia amministrativa, la necessità della burocrazia di seguire regole e procedure rigorose nonché la sua esigenza di raccogliere dati standardizzati, cercando di quantificare anche alcune misure che potrebbero essere difficili da ridurre a un mero aspetto quantitativo. D'altra parte, per quanto riguarda i cittadini, può essere fuorviante e controproducente considerare alcune questioni pubbliche come completamente dentro o fuori dall'agenda politica. Più precisamente, un altro aspetto importante da tenere a mente è quello che riguarda le agende politiche: ognuna di esse ha una capacità massima e ciò limita la quantità di problemi pubblici che può affrontare contemporaneamente, stabilendo così la concorrenza tra le questioni per un posto tra le priorità da risolvere. In questi casi, strumenti come il framing strategico e l'utilizzo mirato di termini concreti e comprensibili possono davvero fare la differenza.

Ciò che è stato dimostrato è che ogni sforzo nel dare rilevanza alle questioni pubbliche è mirato a raggiungere l'agenda governativa e, in ultima analisi, quella decisionale. Se il dibattito pubblico può essere limitato a uno scontro dialettico e politico tra chi dà rilevanza a determinati problemi e chi li minimizza, lo status quo è generalmente favorevole a quest'ultimo gruppo, mentre alcuni eventi di focalizzazione estrema che rendono visibili a tutti gli impatti negativi di determinati problemi pubblici favoriscono il primo gruppo. In ogni caso si tratta di esempi positivi di partecipazione e di cittadinanza attiva per la propria

comunità, pratiche raccolte ad esempio dalla piattaforma Partecipedia, la quale documenta migliaia di buone pratiche in tutto il mondo per ciò che concerne il tema della partecipazione democratica e fornisce spunti di riflessione preziosi e contenuti molto utili. Nuovi esempi virtuosi si stanno concretizzando in Italia e analizzando le specificità del policy-making i casi studio di Rimini, Bologna e Roma rappresentano una ricchezza per il tessuto sociale e politico delle città e ripolitizzano le politiche urbane in un'era di depoliticizzazione e scarso interesse per la cosa pubblica. Rimini viene citata per la questione ambientale: con il risanamento idrico-fognario che è stato concretizzato tra il 2011 e il 2021 nei due mandati del sindaco Andrea Gnassi, la città è stata citata come best practice dall'ONU per l'Obiettivo 14 dell'Agenda 2030 sulla tutela della vita marina ed il progetto è il PSB (Piano di Salvaguardia della Balneazione) evolutosi poi in PSBO (Piano di Salvaguardia della Balneazione Ottimizzato), il più grande progetto di risanamento idrico attualmente in corso in Italia. Ricavando due enormi vasche sotterranee in cui depositare la pioggia ed avendo potenziato il depuratore di Santa Giustina (il più grande depuratore a membrane presente in Europa) le acque reflue urbane non arrivano più in mare, bensì vengono depurate e tutti gli scarichi a mare entro il 2024 saranno chiusi. Il caso studio di Bologna si sofferma invece sul Regolamento sulla collaborazione tra cittadini e amministrazione per la cura e la rigenerazione dei beni comuni urbani. L'amministrazione comunale del capoluogo emiliano-romagnolo si è spesa tantissimo negli anni recenti per le politiche partecipative ed il coinvolgimento della cittadinanza, predisponendo strumenti normativi destinati a fare scuola per gli anni a venire e a essere emulati in altre realtà locali. Infine Roma, la Capitale, forse la città più complessa e più organizzativamente frammentata in Italia. Il caso studio da me scelto si riferisce ad un singolo municipio di Roma, il Primo Municipio, nel quale è stato siglato un Patto di comunità, iniziativa di solidarietà che ha raccolto oltre settanta adesioni, tra cui Comunità di Sant'Egidio, Acli Roma, Croce Rossa Italiana, Emergency e tante altre realtà. L'obiettivo è quello di creare una rete territoriale stabile facendo rete tra i diversi gruppi attivi in un certo spazio urbano, facendo sistema tra professionalità, spazi, competenze e risorse umane, con l'ente pubblico (in questo caso il Primo Municipio) come raccordo tra tutte queste associazioni, il terzo settore, i circoli, le sedi sindacali o religiose. L'impulso per questo patto è nato dalla constatazione che durante e dopo la pandemia da Covid-19 tutte le persone già fragili rischiano di vivere, ognuna a proprio modo, un significativo allentamento delle reti di inclusione e accompagnamento. Dovendo dunque dare delle risposte strutturali e di lungo periodo, volte alla ripresa dell'economia, del lavoro e dello sviluppo, si è voluto cogliere l'occasione per ridisegnare una ripresa più giusta ed equilibrata che non lasci nessuno indietro.