



Between the “southern question” and  
the “urban question”

The struggle for social justice in  
touristified southern Italian cities

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## Abstract

This paper explores the intertwining of touristification and the commons in contemporary Southern Italian cities. In particular, it sheds light on the articulation of two processes: a “Southern Question”, namely the framing of Southern populations as a “problem” to be overcome through capitalist modernization; and an “Urban Question” as the reshaping of the urban structure under the pressure of the broader economic context and the ruling classes’ strategies. The focus will be on Naples as a city in which both a powerful movement for the urban commons and a profound reconfiguration of the urban economy in a touristic sense are observable in the post-2008 crisis conjuncture. It will be highlighted how the increasing pervasiveness of capitalist capture also opens up new conflictual spaces for renegotiating the city.

## Résumé

Cet article explore l’entremêlement entre la touristification et les biens communs dans les villes contemporaines de l’Italie du Sud. Il met l’accent en particulier sur l’articulation de deux processus : une « question méridionale », à savoir la définition des populations méridionales comme un « problème » à surmonter par la modernisation capitaliste ; et une « question urbaine » qui s’entend comme le remodelage de la structure urbaine sous la pression d’un contexte économique plus vaste et des stratégies des classes dirigeantes. L’accent sera mis sur Naples, ville dans laquelle on peut observer dans la conjoncture de l’après-crise de 2008 un puissant mouvement pour les biens communs urbains ainsi qu’une profonde reconfiguration de l’économie urbaine à portée touristique. La façon dont l’omniprésence croissante de l’appropriation capitaliste permet également l’ouverture de nouveaux espaces conflictuels pour renégocier la ville sera soulignée.

**Keywords:** Commons, Law, Social movements, Tourism, Neoliberalism, Italy, Public space, Urban space, Community, Gentrification, Private / public

**Mot-clés :** Biens communs, Espace public, Espace urbain, Communauté, Italie, Droit, Mouvements sociaux, Tourisme, Privé / public, Néolibéralisme, Gentrification

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# Between the “southern question” and the “urban question”

Veronica Pecile

## **The “mystery of Naples” and “orientalism in one country”**

In *The Prison Notebooks* written in the 1930s, Antonio Gramsci calls “mistero di Napoli” what seems like an anomaly of the city’s social and economic structure. The inhabitants’ industriousness and economic activities are remarkably intense, yet they are not considered “productive” in strictly conventional capitalist terms. The reason for this is simple and consists of the fact that these occupations are not aimed at satisfying the needs of the so-called productive classes. Gramsci explains that this phenomenon is the consequence of a specific class composition that has contingent historical origins: in the biggest city of the Italian *Mezzogiorno*, a relatively small class of owners is surrounded by a plethora of artisans, hawkers, middlemen, intermediaries, layabouts who are constantly engaging in diverse activities aimed at breaking down the flows of trade and the delivery of services into minuscule parts. Gramsci claims that this peculiar kind of industriousness is a major feature not only of Naples, but also of many other Southern Italian cities in which the economic life thrives in a context of absence or scarce presence of industries (and factories), and the sector of the “productive” economy—the one which creates and accumulates goods—is of relatively small size (Gramsci 1977).

While in the following decades, capitalist modernization will structurally change the economies and societies of the diverse Southern Italian region called *Mezzogiorno*, the population Gramsci refers to still represents the backbone of the social fabric of Southern Italian cities. We are talking about a vast

population of individuals “immersed in very small-scale, often off-the-books entrepreneurial activities” (Schneider and Schneider 2003) who access the economy mainly through non-formal channels and whose everyday practices hardly fit in any Western modern paradigm of what “civil society” is.

The presence of these urban populations needs to be contextualized within the historical path of the Italian national project and the peculiar trajectory of Italian capitalism. Ever since Italian unification, a process of internal racialization produced and reproduced the South and its inhabitants as the “others” *vis-à-vis* the modern capitalism embodied by the Northern part of the country. This stark opposition between the North as an ideal type of progress and civilization and the South as the embodiment of Mediterranean backwardness and the subsequent conceptualization of the South as a national “problem” constitutes the Italian “Southern Question”. The asymmetrical power relation that results from this opposition can be described as “Orientalism in one country” (**schneider\_introduction:\_1998?**).

The construction of Southern populations as marginal within the Italian national project has been renewed at all the main stages of capitalist transformation affecting the country. I argue that the ongoing process of touristicification in Southern Italian cities—which is the focus of this article—is one of these moments. While after the Second World War, the exploitation of Southern labor consisted in the deployment of workers coming from the *Mezzogiorno* in the factories of the North—and their turning into the makers of the *miracolo economico* (Ginsborg 1990)—in the current post-Fordist configuration, the extraction of value from Southern Italian regions assumes different forms, which are very much in line with the bio-political character of the contemporary modes of labor exploitation. Indeed, in the present conjuncture capitalist value extraction focuses in a paramount way on cultural forms, affective networks, and social cooperation (Hardt and Negri 2009). This implies that the otherness of Southern Italy shifts from being considered an obstacle to modernization—a hurdle that needs to be assimilated into the logic of progress—to being one of the very objects of capitalist accumulation. The transformation of Southern alterity into a trigger for value extraction takes place through a set of public policies, legislations, discursive regimes, and cultural representations which constantly re-create the otherness (*vis-à-vis* modernity, capitalism, progress) of Southern cities and their populations. These are produced by intellectuals, institutions, political elites, and all those subjects who create hegemony in Gramscian terms, that is, an

organization of consensus through which the dominant classes exert control over the dominated (Pecile 2020). In the creation of hegemony, urban elites play an important role as they increasingly embrace a posture that can be described as “strategic self-orientalism” (Umbach and Wishnoff 2008). This means actively promoting the transformation of the urban poor’s form of life into a commodity to attract increasing flows of tourists and investments, in a context of competition among urban economies (Harvey 1989). The managerial model adopted by urban elites implies that the provision of services is gradually taken over by market logic (Mendes 2018). In order to maximize the attractiveness of cities, speculative processes in the urban space are encouraged by city administrations and the conditions for the survival of the most vulnerable residents of the historic centers are eroded (Pecile 2021). As theorized by Castells in his famous reflection on the “urban question”, across all phases of capitalist development—including the current one—it is possible to trace the ways in which the urban form is produced, on a social plan, by the broader political and economic structure in order to serve and consolidate the interests of the ruling classes (Castells 1972).

This paper analyzes the intertwinement between touristification and the commons in the context of Southern Italian cities after the 2008 economic crisis. It focuses on how both the “Southern Question”—the government of Southern populations as a “problem” to be solved through capitalist modernization—and the “Urban Question”—how the urban structure is informed by the larger economic context and the ruling classes’ strategies—are at play in this scenario. In Part 1, the peculiar trajectory of the Italian movement for the commons in Southern touristified cities will be summarized. It will be highlighted how the initial radical attitude of the mobilization—epitomized by activists reclaiming spaces and resources as *beni comuni* beyond the private/public alternative—has been partially co-opted by local administrations that used a top-down notion of the commons to discipline the urban space and turn it into a space more prone to tourists’ and investors’ needs. In Part 2, Naples will be analyzed as the example of a city in which two intertwined processes have been shaping the urban space in the post-2008 crisis phase. On the one hand, we see a movement for the urban commons experimenting with counter-hegemonic uses of the law to assert its claims on spaces of collective fruition and developing a political praxis that has informed the policy agenda of the municipality. On the other hand, a profound reconfiguration of the urban economy towards a tourism-based model is at work. This process has

accelerated during the post-crisis decade of the 2010s, but it is rooted in the last decades of the twentieth century and has a specific significance for the ruling classes. In Part 3, the article will zoom on the case study of Palazzo Penne, a historic building located in one of the most touristified areas of Naples which was the object of a mobilization trying to subtract it from the tourism economy. This section sheds light on how the increasing pervasiveness of capitalist capture within the contemporary city also opens up new spaces of conflict in which new radical conceptions of the city can be negotiated. Part 4 will resume the main aspects that have emerged throughout the paper concerning the complex relationship between the urban commons and touristification. It will also look at legal tactics deployed worldwide by urban social movements “hacking” the urban planning process to defend the interests of the most marginalized inhabitants of the city. The aim of such “grassroots urban planning” is the democratization of urban space and the activation of mechanisms redistributing the revenues generated by tourism to address socioeconomic inequality.

### **The entanglement of commons and touristification in the post-2008 crisis phase**

The creation of urban economies based on tourism in Southern Italy was greatly promoted by local elites in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, intensifying during the 2010s and especially at the end of the decade. In this post-crisis conjuncture, the Italian movement for the commons emerged as a strong force of resistance to the processes of privatization of resources and spaces promoted by austerity policies (**dardot\_commun.\_2014?**). In Italian cities, activists tactically deployed the law to reclaim the commons, that is, they resorted to legal tools to guarantee the collective use and access of all spaces whose common fruition allows the exercise of fundamental rights. Since this counter-hegemonic use of the law implied experimenting with direct democracy methods of government of spaces, it can be said that the movement for the commons acted as a constituent power, namely as a collective subject engaging in bottom-up forms of institution-making (Bailey and Mattei 2013).

In Southern Italian cities, the struggle for the commons has been facing the consequences on the social fabric of the economic recession as well as of pre-existing conditions of “almost-structural crisis” in terms of poverty,

unemployment, and access to services (Di Felicianantonio and Aru 2018). In these contexts, touristification consists in a top-down strategy of organization of spaces and economies implemented by urban elites to satisfy the needs of tourists and investors at the expense of the residents’ needs and in particular the most vulnerable ones, such as the poor, the migrants and the precarious (Stein 2019). Touristification triggers a set of disruptive processes in the urban and social fabric, such as the enclosure of public space, the erosion of the right to housing for local inhabitants, gentrification, and environmental harm (Calzada 2020).

It should be mentioned that the ongoing touristification of Italian cities is part of a wider supranational dynamic. In the post-2008 crisis phase, a broad phenomenon of urban over-tourism and government-led urban revival has been concerning several areas of Southern Europe, modifying their social structure and threatening the survival of the vulnerable inhabitants who are displaced from increasingly exclusive historic areas (Rossi 2022; Tulumello and Allegretti 2021). Within this context, the Italian case highlights how the conversion of urban economies to a tourism-based model can also take place through a cooptation of the discourse and political praxis of the commons by city administrations. Here, touristification as a specific mode of value extraction based on the urban poor’s otherness and folkloric character for the gaze of tourists and investors is implemented through discursive regimes, public policies, and legislation that promote a civic and highly moralized notion of *beni comuni*.

As an example, we can turn to the “Regulation on the collaboration between citizens and administration for the care, regeneration and shared management of urban commons” (*Regolamento sulla collaborazione tra cittadini e amministrazione per la cura, la rigenerazione e la gestione condivisa dei beni comuni urbani*) adopted by almost three hundred Italian municipalities, including many Southern cities<sup>1</sup>. The explicit goal of this legal tool is to achieve a “shared administration” of the commons, namely, according to Article 2:

the organizational model which, by implementing the constitutional principle of horizontal subsidiarity, allows citizens and administration to carry out activities of general interest on an equal level (Tonanzi 2020).

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<sup>1</sup>280 as of December 2022, as reported on the website of the Labsus association that drafted the regulation.



Furthermore, actors mobilizing for the commons are described as “active citizens”, that is:

all subjects (...) who, independently of the requirements concerning residence or citizenship are activated, also for limited periods of time, for the care, regeneration and shared management of urban commons (Tonanzi 2020).

This kind of legal codification of the commons, which became a backbone of urban space governance in the whole country due to its broad diffusion, promotes a notion of *beni comuni* significantly differing from the one embraced by activists. While the latter conceived the struggle for the commons as a quest for social justice and against the socio-economic aggravated created by neoliberal policies, the regulation adopts a depoliticized concept of *beni comuni* as a governmental tool aimed at disciplining the urban space and its populations. In this vision, the citizen is turned into an “ethical subject” (Muehlebach 2012), a collaborator of the public administration who is held accountable for social issues that previously fell under the State’s responsibility. At the time of the collapse of public welfare, what can be observed is a profound reconfiguration of the citizen’s subjectivity, who becomes a “moral actor” compelled to deal individually and privately with what was previously a collective pursuit, namely the delivery of public services. The outcome is the exclusion of all subjects who do not conform to the ideal type of the liberal, consumerist member of a modern capitalist civil society (Pecile 2019). The urban poor, the “others” who frequently inhabit the historic centers of Southern Italian cities certainly do not align with these parameters. They resist governmental attempts of definition and control and rather resemble what postcolonial studies call “political society”, namely the majority of the human population that does not fit into the Western definition of civil society and accesses citizenship in ways that are labeled as non-legal, para-legal or even deviant (Chatterjee 2004).

However, it is important to underline that attempts of cooptation more or less deliberate have not resulted in full control of the movement for the commons, whose creative potential from a political and legal point of view is far from being tamed. For instance, as for public law regulations, a counter-model to the one described above is the Regulation for the participation to the government and the care of the commons (*Regolamento comunale per la partecipazione nel governo e nella cura dei beni comuni*) adopted by the municipality of Chieri

in 2014. In this document, the emphasis on the paradigm of shared administration at the core of the previously mentioned regulation leaves room for the recognition of communities—both formal and informal ones—as the main subject in charge of identifying spaces and resources as commons (City of Chieri 2014). This model downsizes the prominence of the city administration’s role in managing the commons and leaves the latter to the self-government of open and autonomous communities, which make decisions according to methods of assembly democracy ([quarta\\_possibilita\\_2016?](#)).

More than a decade has now passed since the beginning of the Italian mobilization for *beni comuni*; since then, the commons have become a broadly adopted political and legal concept, deployed both by activists and by municipalities to bring forward different, at times even conflicting visions of the city. While in the wake of the movement the commons were meant as an antidote to the privatization of resources and services, they ended up being partially co-opted within extractive processes also taking place in the name of a governmental, bureaucratic notion of the commons. At this stage, it is worth interrogating whether the commons still retain the analytical and political power of resisting sophisticated dynamics of value extraction such as the ones at play in touristified urban economies. Can the commons still be reclaimed to resist the private/public “double capture” threatening the historic centers? And if the answer to this question is yes, what legal tactics could be mobilized by activists to fulfill this aim?

## **Can the commons resist touristification? The example of Naples**

To find a tentative answer to such questions, the focus here is on the case of Naples as an example of a Southern Italian city whose historic center has been the stage of two intertwined processes concerning the urban space, namely a broad mobilization for the commons and a process of touristification. As for the first phenomenon, since the aftermath of the crisis, a strong movement for the urban commons has been reclaiming a right to a collective use of spaces otherwise doomed to privatization or abandonment. In 2011 already, the city administration led by Luigi de Magistris engaged in a dialogue with the mobilization and modified the municipal charter (*statuto comunale*) to include the commons among the fundamental values of the city. A year later, the municipality approved the Regulation of the councils for the discipline of

the commons (*Regolamento delle consulte per la disciplina dei beni comuni*) and in 2013, a resolution was enforced that listed the principles for the government and management of the Neapolitan commons. In 2014, two further resolutions were adopted concerning the restitution of abandoned spaces (either publicly or privately owned) to the collectivity. On that occasion, the communities’ capacity to self-govern the uses and functions of such spaces was also recognized<sup>2</sup>. In the vocabulary adopted by the municipality in its resolutions, the urban commons are “already existing experiences in the territory of the municipality, which are carried on by groups and/or committees of citizens according to logics of self-government and experimentation of direct management of public spaces, thereby demonstrating that they perceive those spaces as places that can be the object of collective fruition to the advantage of the local community<sup>3</sup>”. The municipality of Naples thus provided an array of public and private spaces with the status of commons by virtue of their social use that fulfills collective needs (Corbisiero 2019). This recognition is in line with Article 42 of the Italian Constitution, in which the principle of the social function of property is enshrined<sup>4</sup>.

The peak of the Neapolitan struggle for the commons was the drafting in 2013 of a public law regulation that revived *usi civici*, a residual form of ownership enshrined in the Italian legal system as a means to ensure collective access to natural resources for communities (Marinelli 2013). This grassroots process started with the occupation in 2012 of ex-Asilo Filangieri, a 16th-century public building that the municipality wanted to sell out on the market (Capone 2016). Activists tactically resorted to the legal institution of *usi civici* as a tool to legitimize not only the occupation of the palace, but also the activities of all grassroots communities scattered around the city providing non-State forms of welfare to the most marginalized residents, for instance through

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<sup>2</sup>The municipal charter and all the other mentioned documents on the management of the commons in Naples are available online on the website of the municipality.

<sup>3</sup>As stated in the municipal resolution n. 400 of May 25, 2012 website of the municipality.

<sup>4</sup>“Property is public or private. Economic assets may belong to the State, to public bodies or to private persons. Private property is recognized and guaranteed by the law, which prescribes the way it is acquired, enjoyed and its limitations so as to ensure its social function and make it accessible to all” (Article 42 of the Italian Constitution). Such a definition implies a relativization of property: all forms of it, either public or private, shall contribute to the fulfillment of the principles of the Constitution, which holds the full development of the individual as one of its intrinsic values (Marella 2013).

self-governed medical cabinets or legal assistance to migrants. Activists then successfully negotiated with the municipality and obtained the adoption by the city council of a regulation recognizing the status of commons for seven occupied spaces on the legal basis of *usi civici*. This regulation established that the concerned spaces had to be made fully available to communities that could from that moment decide rules and forms of government in collective assemblies.

As for the second phenomenon affecting the Neapolitan urban space over the past years—touristification—it should be noted that the city has been a major national and international touristic hub well before the 2008 economic crisis. The area corresponding to the city center was already declared world cultural heritage by UNESCO in 1995 and includes the majority of the historic real estate heritage owned by the municipality. The center of Naples has the peculiarity of spreading both aboveground and underground (Corbisiero 2019); it has been an important touristic destination since the times of the Grand Tour, in the 17th century, when the educated bourgeoisie of Northern Europe started traveling to the Italian peninsula and writing reports tainted with orientalist tones on Southern Italy as a liminal territory, a frontier between modernity and backwardness. As previously mentioned, after the Italian unification—in the last decades of the 19th century—the *Mezzogiorno* is constructed as the “other” *vis-à-vis* the progressed and civilized North. In this phase, both foreign travelers and the elites of the new nation-state denounced the barbaric and backward character of everyday life in Naples and Southern Italy as a reason to justify thorough State intervention<sup>5</sup> (Moe 2002). During the 20th century, the Neapolitan city center survived two dramatic events, namely the Second World War bombings and the earthquake of 1980. Both caused structural damage to the architectural and social fabric

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<sup>5</sup>The argument of Southerners’ alleged anthropological inferiority was produced not only by foreign visitors, but also by Italian intellectuals. For instance, in an essay that will become the vademecum of the new Italian state’s ruling classes, Sicilian anthropologist Alfredo Niceforo wrote that “here [in the *Mezzogiorno*] Italy has a high mission to accomplish and a colony to civilize” (Niceforo 2012). In the same years following the unification, intellectuals were also urging the national elites to adopt the most modern techniques of government in order to handle Southern populations, which reminded of “the savages of the Americas” (Franchetti 1985). In this phase, the racialization of Southern Italy—the construction of its otherness on a racial basis—was accomplished and reinforced through the introduction of national statistics (Patriarca 1998) and Lombroso’s theories on the supposed biological inferiority of the southerners (Pecile 2020).

of the historic area, where most of the public real estate was located. At that point, many abandoned, underused and run-down buildings became the site of a wide range of everyday practices made by inhabitants that exceeded the uses allowed by the law.

At the end of the 20th century, public authorities started promoting a broad process of urban renewal charged with strong symbolic and political connotations. In the 1990s, during the left-wing administration led by post-Communist mayor Antonio Bassolino, the historic area went through a set of urban and social transformations mainly aimed at getting rid of Naples’ image of “urban outcast” among European cities. Against this bad reputation, Neapolitan progressive elites started claiming the immense value of the city’s cultural heritage to make it the bulwark of new public policies that had to be directed at rebranding the city’s image according to values of *decorum*, *civismo* and legality (Dines 2012). This worry for urban renewal was widespread among Southern European urban elites at that time and was also part of a broader political project aimed at creating a strong middle-class-based civil society concerned with values of democratization, rights and legality as the core of the newly unified liberal front in the post-Cold War era (Schneider and Schneider 2001).

While the choice of a tourism-based urban economy has long been made by local elites, what is new about the post-2008 crisis conjuncture is the emergence of the touristic sector as even more predominant and able to inform radical socio-economic transformation. Urban elites having to face the constraints posed by the economic recession in Southern Europe embraced the option of tourism-based urban economies as a valuable antidote to the budget crises that affected cities (Sequera and Nofre 2018).

The impact of these processes on the social structure of the historic center has been significant. The progressive touristification of the historic area is having dramatic impacts on housing, as highlighted by studies on the increase of Airbnb listings—the so-called “airification”—and the relocation of the original inhabitants to the outskirts of the city that it implies (Cerreta, Mura, and Poli 2020). In 2019 there were more than 7,000 listings for accommodation solutions in Naples on Airbnb and 70% of these were in the historic center. These figures did not include the numerous “improvised” Airbnbs that are not officially registered (Caramiello et al. 2020). Public property assets are thus shifting from being deployed as a tool historically guaranteeing the right to

housing for the popular classes to representing a monetized resource to meet increasing amounts of touristic flows and investments. This reconfiguration is actively promoted by the city government, as witnessed by the drafting of a strategic public policy plan for the city called “*Destinazione Napoli 2020*” and adopted by the center-left wing administration (Caputi and Fava 2019). In this document, the “Naples” brand becomes associated with what scholarship labeled as “experiential tourism”. This consists of a specific tourism modality implying the commodification of those unique practices that are part of the locals’ everyday life and can now be experienced by visitors, such as walking in the narrow streets of a popular flea market in a Mediterranean city (Bock 2015). Hence, the form of life of Naples’ center becomes itself a kind of commodity (Del Romero Renau 2018).

This city plan, and other similar strategies adopted by Southern Italian municipalities to promote experiential tourism, are legitimized and encouraged at the national level. Indeed, the construction of a touristic sector and of a robust “market” of urban regeneration in contemporary capitalism that can attract private actors does not at all imply a *laisser-faire* attitude of public authorities, but rather presupposes an interventionist State machine (Mendes 2018; Brenner, Peck, and Theodore 2013). The operational plan “Culture and Tourism” approved by the Italian government for the years between 2014 and 2020 aims at strengthening the “touristic fruition” of Southern Italian cities, called “urban systems” in the document. This implies the provision of 90 million euros to four historic centers (Naples, Palermo, Taranto, Cosenza), under the policy recommendation of building “a multilevel governance for the realization and management of the interventions”. A special emphasis is put on “interventions of real estate requalification, mobility, quality of the commons and urban decorum”. It is also stated that such acts are part of a broader plan, called “*Grande progetto destinazione Sud*”, whose goal is to achieve economic development through tourism. They have to be realized through private/public governance, “actively involving territorial stakeholders in a participative perspective<sup>6</sup>”.

Despite its pervasiveness and sophistication, touristification is not happening in the absence of dissent and resistance. The growing socioeconomic inequalities triggered urban mobilizations across Southern Europe trying to radically rethink tourism not as a trigger of dispossession but rather as tied to objec-

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<sup>6</sup>The operational plan “Culture and tourism” is available online.

tives of social justice and wealth redistribution. The network SET (Southern Europe against Touristification) was born in Spain and has been active in the past years in cities that have been drastically reconfigured in their urban and social composition by the conversion of local economies to a tourism-based model. As for the Italian context, mobilizations opposing touristification that are linked to SET are in partial continuity with the movement for the commons, which despite the attempts of cooptation previously described has not yet extinguished its critique of property and has “contaminated”—with its vocabulary, political praxis, and use of the law—other movements seeking urban justice. SET has been active in Naples since 2018 and aims at creating ways to redistribute the wealth generated by tourism among the most marginalized residents. In 2018, Naples became the most visited city in Southern Italy, hosting 3.8 million visitors (Caramiello et al. 2020). The work of SET is both a political one—consisting in community organizing through regular public assemblies, only interrupted during the lockdown months—and a speculative one, implying the involvement of intellectuals, researchers, and experts providing a theoretical outlook on the sophisticated mechanisms of value capture that are at play. This combination of political praxis and critical analysis helps to face the challenge of connecting the materiality of living conditions affected by value extraction with the abstract character of the financial flows that underpin such extractive processes (Rolnik 2019). The ultimate goal is to find a shared political grammar to think of such a relation and subvert it. The issues that SET deals with, most of them shared with other touristified cities in Southern Europe, include the increase of the precarious labor of individuals employed in the tourism industry; the transformation of commercial activities located in historic centers into activities functional to fulfilling the needs of tourists and real estate investors; and the gradual erosion of the right to housing caused by private/public real estate speculation. As mentioned, the latter issue is a particularly urgent one in the case of Naples, as housing is being subtracted from the rental market for popular classes to become a target of speculation<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup>The *battaglia del pesone* is the expression for “the fight for the rent” (*pesone* is “rent” in Neapolitan dialect) in which the popular classes have increasingly been engaging in the past years (Caramiello et al. 2020).

## **The mobilization of the SET network for Palazzo Penne as a commons**

It is now worth interrogating how the urban commons and touristification interact in the Neapolitan urban space through an empirical example. Located at the heart of the *centro storico*, Palazzo Penne was built at the beginning of the 15th century in the proximity of *largo Banchi Nuovi*, one of the main points of entry into the old city. The palace, made of three floors and an inner courtyard, was owned by several noble families throughout the centuries. In 1950, about fifty family units were living in the building. In 1990, the owner sold it to a private investor who tried to turn it into a hotel and evicted twenty families. At that point, a mobilization started to raise awareness on the need for a public restoration and a social and cultural use for the building and managed to block the works (Napoli Monitor 2021). Then, in 2003, the Campania Region bought the building from its private owner and in 2004 gave it as a free loan (*comodato d'uso*) to the University of Naples “L’Orientale” for a project involving the construction of laboratories and classrooms. However, these were never built and abusive construction activities started inside the building, before being interrupted by a civil society mobilization for the preservation of the Palazzo in 2007. By that time, the building was in a state of abandonment and neglect, which compromised its safety. The president of the Region and the director of the University were then investigated for allegedly damaging the historical building and not conducting the necessary restoration and maintenance (Chetta 2008). In 2008, public works for ensuring the safety of the palace began, and in 2013 the restoration and restructuring of the whole building started.

More recently, in 2019, the Campania Region allocated 10 million euros to carry out a further restoration of the Palazzo, at the core of a historic area affected by touristification. The allocation of this sum is part of an operation promoted by the Region and supported by the city council aimed at turning this publicly-owned building into a “House of architecture and design” that should be managed in the future by the University of Naples (Margiotta 2020).

In 2021, activists of SET started mobilizing against the implementation of this plan on several grounds, as they consider it paradigmatic of the socio-economic distortions generated by a tourism-based urban economy not accompanied by adequate mechanisms for wealth redistribution. First of all,



activists claimed, the plan does not include any valid housing solution for Jolanda, an almost 80-year-old woman who was born and raised in the building and is today both the guardian and a “living memory” of Palazzo Penne (Rossi 2022). Secondly, the plan was made without setting up any kind of dialogue with the associations that have been campaigning for years in favor of a social use of Palazzo Penne at the end of its restoration. Thirdly, activists denounced that public authorities did not share information on how and when the safety of the building would be restored to allow for public access. In sum, SET argued that the case of Palazzo Penne is not unique, as the “museumification” of the historic center for tourists’ consumption is proceeding at a very fast pace. Activists added that the examples are manifold: the Monte di Pietà building, whose sale to a private actor was announced by Banca Intesa San Paolo; or the Church of Saints Cosma and Damiano, which was refurbished using the public funding of the UNESCO plan for the historic center and whose management was conceded to private actors. Against the consolidation of this model, activists of SET reclaimed the right to access and use the Palazzo Penne for all residents (**SET\_decidiamo\_2021?**).

To oppose the Region-sponsored plan concerning Palazzo Penne, SET organized a popular consultation concerning the use of the building in 2021. The idea is that the building is public and so should be its use, also in line with the principle of the social function of property enshrined in the Italian Constitution. The implicit reference was not only to the already mentioned Article 42 of the constitutional text, but also to the legal definition of *beni comuni* provided by the Rodotà Commission in 2007<sup>8</sup>. According to SET, the residents of the neighborhood surrounding Palazzo Penne—*quartiere Porto* and *quartiere San Giuseppe*—as well as the daily users of this urban area should express their opinion concerning the intended use (*destinazione d’uso*) of the palace. This is especially true considering that the land use plan (*piano regolatore*) of the city highlights a lack of public space in the *Porto* neighborhood (Napoli Monitor 2021). For instance, activists highlighted that the inner courtyard could be used as a public garden for the benefit of the whole population. Con-

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<sup>8</sup>The Rodotà Commission defines the commons as “the things expressing utilities functional to the exercise of fundamental rights and the free development of the individual. The commons must be protected and safeguarded by the legal system, also to the benefit of future generations. The holders of the commons can be public legal persons or private ones. In any case their collective fruition must be guaranteed, within the limits and according to the modalities fixed by the law. [...]” (Rodotà Commission Bill 2007).

cerning this option, Italian case law provides an excellent precedent, namely the recognition of a collective right of access to property—the so-called *res in usu publico*. This legal institution, based on the distinction between property title and use of a thing, enables communities to use and access spaces whose fruition allows the exercise of fundamental rights<sup>9</sup>.

Either way, activists of SET aimed at ensuring a social and public use for the building. This could mean, in addition to the public garden option, using parts of the Palazzo as a kindergarten, a space for the socialization of the elderly, or a residence for homeless people. During the consultation in 2021, the majority chose the option of turning Palazzo Penne into a social space for the elderly and children (SET\_chi\_2021?). The next step would be pushing the Region to take into account the results of this democratic procedure of participation when deciding on the intended use of the Palazzo, instead of turning it into an exclusive venue such as a House of architecture and design. In other words, activists of SET expected that the municipality embraced participation not as a slogan but as an institutional mechanism informing the city government to solve concrete situations of inequality. In the post-2008 crisis years, a strong emphasis on a “grammar of participation” by urban elites has created a risk of bureaucratization and co-optation of the commons and other mobilizations reclaiming urban justice (Kelty 2016). Against this trend, SET asks that institutions implement the regional law for the development of the quality of architecture that involves the deployment of “active practices of participation<sup>10</sup>”.

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<sup>9</sup>The origins of the recognition of *res in usu publico* date back to the late 19th century. The owner of Villa Borghese, which included a vast park in which residents used to hang out and take walks, suddenly decided to enclose the area and ban the collective access to the park. At that point the mayor of Rome, representing all citizens, sued him maintaining that the park was *res in usu publico*, that is, private property with a collective right of access. The court welcomed the mayor’s plea and restored the public access to the park. This decision resonates with the public trust doctrine available in the common law systems (Landi and Pecile 2017; Marella 2015).

<sup>10</sup>As stated by Article 2 of the regional law. The text is available online.



Figure 1: **Palazzo Penne**, the 15th-century building located in the historic center of Naples that has been the target of the mobilization organized by the SET collective

## **“Grassroots urban planning”: how zoning, rent laws, Community Land Trusts and taxation can provide antidotes to touristification**

Touristification is one of the main processes through which the neoliberal restructuring of Southern Italian urban economies and societies is taking place in the post-2008 crisis conjuncture. As highlighted by the case study of Naples, the relation between the urban commons and touristification in the historic centers of the *Mezzogiorno* is a tight and ambivalent one. This complex bond makes it difficult to formulate any big overarching theory; proceeding through case-by-case analysis seems more fruitful, both theoretically and politically, as each city presents its peculiarities in terms of power relations and socioeconomic configuration.

The ambivalence of the relation between *beni comuni* and touristification in Southern Italian cities is mainly caused by the coexistence of two interconnected dynamics. On the one hand, capitalist accumulation in these urban contexts is becoming increasingly sophisticated and pervasive, also due to the changes brought in by platform capitalism. In this capillary, bio-political mode of value extraction that has everyday life practices as its target, the urban poor—the “unproductive” of Gramsci’s account—may well remain outside of formal labor exploitation, and yet they are not mere “spectators” of the spectacle of surplus-value. Rather, they are fully involved—with their bodies and the materiality of their form of living—in processes of value creation that are essential for contemporary capitalism. This is especially true in urban spaces that are increasingly crossed by digital technologies complexifying and amplifying the scope and depth of capitalist capture.

On the other hand, and on a more optimistic note, touristification crucially implies the opening up of new spaces that become available for the political praxis of social movements seeking urban justice. In current touristified settings, the struggle for the urban commons can reemerge as significantly revitalized. Touristification triggers new geographies of urban conflict: the violence of capitalist extraction affecting the historic areas has shifted the focus of urban social movements to the center of the city. It shakes up urban space and the power relations that exist in it, creating battlefields in which the city can be negotiated anew and new urban visions can be experimented. The role of civil society and social movements in determining urban planning

becomes ever more important, as the State ceases to be the sole planning agent in charge of deciding how the city should be shaped from an urban and socioeconomic point of view. Considering the State—also in its local expression and levels—relationally, instead of as a monolithic structure, allows seeing how in specific conjunctures it can reflect and enact more progressive, even radical political positions (Poulantzas 1980). Examples of how social movements can conceive and put in practice new ways of social and spatial organizing have been multiplying over the past years and have been labeled by scholarship as “grassroots urban planning”. These socio-spatial strategies are aimed at transforming the organization of both space and social relations, which cannot change if the former stays the same<sup>11</sup> (Lopes de Souza 2006).

Recent research highlighted how urban planning can be an essential battlefield to imagine a just city and safeguard the property interests of low-income inhabitants. Rather than considering it as a bureaucratic and technical arena, urban social movements are turning to planning as a realm in which power relations can be shifted. In Lefebvrian terms, urban planners are in charge of transforming social needs into material spaces, thus being at the crucial nexus between capital, the State, and residents (Lefebvre 1991; Stein 2019). A political praxis that has been developing in Latin American contexts as well as in the “Global North” is showing how planning is becoming less a State-monopolized, top-down crafting of the urban space and more a conflictive field in which the relationship between law, space and justice is renegotiated. These practices reveal that the “real estate State”—namely, a government in which the interests of developers are overly represented—is a historically contingent political construct that can be unmade by social movements. Socio-

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<sup>11</sup>The theoretical background underpinning this attitude is the “spatial turn” that emerged in social sciences and legal theory in the 1990s. The basis for this shift is provided by reflections on the concept of space offered by Michel Foucault and Henri Lefebvre. In particular, Foucault defined the twentieth century as the time of simultaneity, the “epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is [...] that of a network that connect points [...] One could perhaps say that certain ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendants of time and the determined inhabitants of space (Foucault 1986, 22). As for Lefebvre, he considered the space as inherently social, both permeated and produced by social relations. He also wrote about the “explosion of spaces” as a typical trait of contemporary capitalism, “as neither capital nor the State can control the contradictory space they produced” (Lefebvre 2009, 190).

spatial configurations are not carved in stone; they can change when people organize through institutional and contentious politics.

As we approach the conclusion, we can ask ourselves how to imagine tactics of urban planning that can allow the redistribution of tourism-generated wealth. In other words, we may wonder how justice can be enacted in increasingly unequal urban scenarios (Soja 2010). In the neoliberal context, this can mean first of all using the master’s tools against the master itself. For instance, empirical evidence shows that “inclusionary zoning”—usually deployed as a public measure to involve private actors in the construction of housing in poor neighborhoods—can be done counter-hegemonically, that is, it can be imposed on rich areas, asking the wealthy to pay back for the gentrification they cause (Stein 2019).

Another option available for activists to “hack” urban planning is the one of interfering with the formulation of rent laws, as is the case of the struggle for rent regulation in Berlin. Under a strong pressure exerted by urban movements that collected thousands of signatures for the right to housing during the pandemic, in 2021 a referendum was held in which a majority of voters asked the city council to expropriate major landlords, hence to “socialize” over three thousand residences that used to be owned by the State before being sold out at very low prices to the real estate sector (Alkousaa and Inverardi 2021). This would mean subtracting these lodgings from the monopoly of constructors and transferring them to a new public law institution administered through the democratic participation of the community of citizens and renters, who agreed on respecting a ban on the apartments’ privatization. According to the broad mobilization that promoted the initiative, the socialization of these formerly public accommodations will not only imply more affordable rents, but will also heal the social fabric by easing the preservation of cultural and artistic spaces, the protection of small businesses as well as provide a shelter for homeless people and victims of domestic violence (Canetta 2021).

Another example is the one of a few working-class districts of New York where residents succeeded in setting up non-speculative housing models amid highly gentrified areas. These grassroots forms of rent control would be a suitable solution for Southern Italian cities, where housing inflation expels original inhabitants to socially and geographically isolated peripheries. Community Land Trusts provide a useful tactic in this sense, as in this legal institution the

property title of the land and the one of the buildings on it are separate, and the latter are owned cooperatively by inhabitants while being subtracted from the oscillations of market speculation (Engelsman, Rowe, and Southern 2018; Vercellone 2016). The ultimate result is a “functional” de-commodification of land and housing (Stein 2019).

A further way to orient urban planning towards social justice is reconceiving the link between property and taxes. For instance, city administrations can decide to tax all kinds of revenue that private actors gain from the organization of public and private events taking place in central areas. In this way, the value created by such initiatives would return to the community that generated it in the first place rather than going into the pockets of developers (Hern 2016). As for Southern Italian cities, the use of this tool could be extended to situations in which private subjects exploit the historic areas as scenarios for events that imply the temporary enclosure of the public space. For instance, between 2016 and 2017 the historic centers of Naples and Palermo were the stage of sumptuous private fashion shows authorized by the municipalities to promote the cities as touristic destinations. Protests accompanied both catwalks, which despite having celebratory intentions towards the two cities and their popular imagination ended up being exclusive events epitomizing the mainly private nature of tourism-based revenues. Criticism targeted the role of city administrations, guilty of authorizing “an event for rich people” ultimately amounting to “a form of occupation” (Chetta 2016; Maida 2017). Fashion shows organized in the historic areas of touristified cities amount not only to the enclosure of public space but also to processes of primitive accumulation of the value produced by local culture and residents’ everyday practices. Indeed, touristification implies a subtle, yet strong dimension of class oppression.

These are only some of the tools mobilized by activists to counter the effects of extractive urban economies based on tourism that undermine the very survival of popular classes. In the case of Southern Italian cities, these mechanisms could be deployed in ways that do not aim at suppressing, but rather at keeping alive the informal character of the inhabitants’ everyday practices and forms of life. Grassroots urban planning is a political project based on a tactical use of legal tools. In this way, planning becomes “an ongoing experiment with the informal” and ultimately “self-sufficiency at the social level” (Harney and Moten 2016, 74–76). Its political and legal impact is ambitious: it is the reimagining of the urban legal system as porous–open

to negotiation from the margins—and based on a non-absolute, non-exclusive vision of property.

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