
When squatting becomes ‘stable precarity’. The case of Santa Croce/Spin Time Labs, Rome

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ABSTRACT

Starting from an ethnographic fieldwork project conducted within a squat in Rome (*Santa Croce/Spin Time Labs*), this paper aims to investigate the effects on the lives of squatters in a particular condition of housing liminality that I here define as ‘stable precarity’, due to the more systemic chronicization of housing emergency at a city level. The paper, therefore, takes a two-fold approach: on the one hand, it interprets some of the daily life experiences in the building and the moral economy of the squatter’s community; on the other, it shows the attempts of squatters and activists of the political movement in Rome that squatted the building (Action) to move on from their liminal condition, specifically by transitioning from the more traditional political instruments of the struggle over housing in Rome to an informal practice of urban regeneration that seeks to open the building to the surrounding neighborhood, with the aim of making the squat a common good for public use.

KEYWORDS

precarity, housing emergency, moral economy, squatting, urban social movements

BIO

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Introduction

The rise of neoliberalism in all aspects of our lives (Eriksen 2017), rather than widespread well-being, has brought uncertainty about our individual and collective conditions. This is especially true for housing, which is increasingly perceived as an end point rather than as a starting point for a stable and secure future. Most importantly, the lack of a shelter usually also leads to a precarization in all other spheres of life: a condition that has increasingly led to a perception of domesticity as something at risk for a large slice of the population, both for the more canonically marginal groups in society – today often embodied in the figure of the migrant – and for the middle and working classes.

In Rome, since the post-Second World War period, the so-called local housing emergency is no longer seen as an exception but as a recurrent event. The gradual development of a cultural and moral configuration of housing as a social trophy has also influenced the history of public housing, specifically by shifting the focus of housing and social policies towards the productive middle class (Salsano 2008; Tosi 2009; Vereni 2015) and thus by contributing to the creation of a particular category of excluded and ‘diverse’ people that I define as housing alterity, previously consisting of the unemployed and immigrants from Southern Italy and now mostly non-European migrants. Yet, the persistent scarcity of housing policies for these vulnerable segments of the population still tends to be represented today as a ‘crisis’, either as an overall precarization caused by a rupture in the normal order of things or as an intermediary moment of chaos (Kosseleck 2002: 8). Nevertheless, for many people in Rome, the housing emergency often acquires an enduring hold as it becomes endemic rather than episodic (Vigh 2008: 7): a chronic crisis that causes a continuous critical assessment of the social environment, one’s position and the possibilities of action available within it.

For these reasons, in this article I examine the social and experiential consequences of such an emergency as a condition for Italian and migrant squatters by focusing my ethnographic and analytical attention on the concept of chronicity as an experience of constant crisis (Estroff 1993). Following Henrik Vigh, instead of placing crisis in context I argue that we need to see crisis as context – as a terrain of action and meaning – thereby opening up the field to ethnographic investigation (2008). In fact, the entrenched relationship in Rome between cultural diversity and the temporariness of low-income housing solutions reveals a constant maintenance of a state of emergency, a paradoxical situation that I here define as ‘stable precarity’ (*precarietà stanziata*): that is, that peculiar condition of all squatters who live in abandoned buildings occupied by squatting movements, characterized both by a situation of prolonged crisis where social life is made sense of and unfolds within a terrain of risk and uncertainty (Whyte 1997) and, at the same time, by the possibility to settle down and gain a domestic space without market intermediation. Investigations into different forms of informal housing among migrants are not rare in the social sciences – from human geography to anthropology, covering both the Global North and the Global South (Belloni *et alii* 2020; Bolzoni *et alii* 2015; Giorgi and Fasulo 2013). Indeed, the transition from a chronicization of the housing emergency to a precarization of the lives of people experiencing a housing emergency in squats politically organized by squatting movements has created a particular existential condition – that of stable precarity. This condition is mainly characterized by being settled, even if this entails uncertainty, specifically in former public and private buildings not originally designed for residential purposes and then transformed into dwellings, with both domestic and common areas.

The purpose of this paper is to approach the housing emergency in Rome not as a singular event but rather as an ongoing and precarized process, with the aim of showing how this social chronic crisis has led today to a condition of stable precarity inside squatted buildings characterized by both the desire of the squatters to transform the precariousness of their situation into a medium-to-long term dignified and legitimate condition and by the awareness of the precariousness of that experience, which could actually end in eviction at any time. This contribution will specifically focus on all these aspects through a case study, a squat located in the central *Esquilino* neighborhood in Rome (*Santa Croce/Spin Time Labs*) where I lived for almost a year in order to conduct ethnographic research for my Ph.D. project.

In the first section, I outline a brief ethnographic introduction to the case study and I theoretically define the concept of stable precarity that emerged during my fieldwork, together with what it means for squatters, and how a large-scale phenomenon such as precarization has affected the housing needs of low-income Italians and migrants in Rome. In the second section, I problematize the two interrelated dimensions of the squatters’ stable precarity, namely social and personal housing precarization, through some ethnographic encounters that showed me how it is possible, within a shared condition of precarity

and deprivation, to have manifold experiences of stable precarity that can be interpreted for some squatters as an active search for social legitimacy (Manocchi 2012) and, conversely, for others, as an attempt to conquer the privilege of being invisible (Appadurai 2003) represented by the condition of having a roof, however precarious. In the two concluding sections, I introduce the local moral economy (Fassin 2009; 2015). I also describe how the occurrence of an event such as the Pope's almsgiver restoring electricity in the building has led me to conceive of *Santa Croce/Spin Time* as a culture that constantly shapes collective action (Swidler 1986).



PHOTO 1: Slogans in the squat under analysis: “Here everything is inhabited”. (Photo by Chiara Cacciotti)

Stable precarity

Santa Croce/Spin Time Labs (better known as *Spin Time*) is a nominally illegal squat and social center, within which an informal urban regeneration project is being undertaken. The squat is located in the heart of the well-off *Esquilino* neighborhood, one of the most central in the city and at the same time notoriously characterized by some issues more typical of the periphery such as homelessness and a widespread social malaise, mainly concentrated close to the main railway station, *Roma Termini*.

The building is spatially and socially divided into two main parts: *Santa Croce*, the residential part, and *Spin Time*, the social and cultural center. It is a seven-storey building covering approximately 22 thousand square meters of floor space. It was once owned by the State Social Security Institution INPDAP, but is now the property of the real-estate fund *InvestiRE SGR SPA*. In 2013, it was occupied by the squatting movement *Action* and there are now 143 families (up to 400 people) of 25 different nationalities living there.

I lived inside the building for almost a year¹, conducting ethnographic research for my Ph.D. From the very beginning, I tried to manage what Duncan Fuller called “the politics of integration” (1999); that is, the political integration of the researcher into the community he or she is studying. In this regard, Fuller adopted the famous feminist motto “The personal is political”, according to the interpretation of Stanley and Wise (1993) and Routledge (1996). Routledge, in particular, has reworked the concept from a methodological point of view, noting how political awareness can come through personal involvement and how the strategies of both involvement and integration can deconstruct the barriers between academia and “the lives of people it professes to represent” (Katz 1994: 73) that are too often taken for

¹ From 1st March to 30th November 2019. However, I started attending activities in the building in December 2018, continuing to do so after the end of the fieldwork.

granted. This kind of involvement by the researcher moves away from the presumed but questionable objectivity of ‘going academic’ but, at the same time, strives to remain critical and to continually question the researcher’s social positioning in terms of class, gender, nationality and so on, in an ongoing attempt to remain in a “space of betweenness” (*ibid.*), which also prevents the researcher from ‘going native’. My intent was to endeavor to find common ground, the relational dimension of ethnographic fieldwork that would help me apprehend the most interesting aspects to explore, starting with what my interlocutors wanted to draw attention to, while maintaining our mutual differences and avoiding ‘going squatter’, which I felt was epistemologically and intellectually dishonest, given my lack of housing emergency.



PHOTO 2: The room where I lived during the fieldwork (Photo by Chiara Cacciotti)

In the beginning, I felt strange precisely because I was able to leave at the end of each assembly or meeting and return to my social (and housing) normalcy. As a result, I felt that I was unable to grasp the real complexity of their precarious living conditions. However, once I moved into the building all the relationships that were initially established on a more professional basis gradually became more and more personal. Once I was living in the squat, the ‘political’ was visible to me (also) through the ‘personal’. As the months went by, I realized that almost all the squatters I met in the building shared a chronically precarious life story, since they were either unemployed or low-income workers and they always found it hard to settle down and pay a rent in the Italian capital.

Despite (and also due to) the long-term duration of their precarious status, and given the nominally illegal status of the building, most of *Santa Croce*’s squatters were trying to find their own way to inhabit and settle in that precarious and uncertain condition, and they each had practices and discourses that were sometimes also influenced by their past housing experiences:

Does your home here reflect who you are?

I don’t really have that vision of home. I mean, it reflects who I am because everything I have here has been recycled... and I’m fine with that, even if it’s just a small room. Perhaps, after all, the idea of doing something permanent would be pushing it a bit too far for me...

So, do you feel more comfortable in a temporary condition?

Probably not... but it’s what I have, and I try to manage it. I’m not under a bridge and I am happy about that because I have lived on the streets and I know what kind of life that is, it is a

stressful life. I think I have just lowered my expectations because I don't want to have too many expectations, I live in the present and if one day they gave us public housing it would be quite another thing, but right now this way of living goes hand in hand with my prosperity... which is not a lot! (June 7, 2019).

Jennifer is fifty and she has lived alone in Italy since 1996, mostly in apartments shared with students. Nonetheless, the precariousness of her work situation often led her to move house until, after a short life experience in Milan, she finally discovered Action. When she arrived in Rome “with five euros in her jeans pocket”, she was hosted by a friend while she looked for a better solution, which she finally found in squatting a building in 2012 and then in *Santa Croce* in 2016, after undergoing an eviction process. The apparently oxymoronic sense of feeling both precarious and at home in *Santa Croce*, in her case, was therefore not due to a disappointment or a failure to fulfil her housing expectations, but rather to a life history that was chronically precarious, which lowered her expectations and led to her living in the moment, without forcing herself to search for a permanence she felt she couldn't achieve.

Given the heterogeneity of housing backgrounds and future projects among the squatters in the building, together with the fact that many of them wish to permanently settle in the building, one of Action's main goals is to ensure as much as possible that squatters do not just consider their own individual needs, or at least that the latter do not constitute an obstacle to achieving collective well-being and to the political struggle over housing in general:

Many people think that this is an end point. Many. And this is a mistake, because you then rest on your laurels, not understanding that this is not a point of arrival, it is a transitory and starting point. Nobody told us “Yes, this place is yours, you can keep it, do whatever you want”. We are all transitory and it should just be a starting point to reach the final goal (Massimo, January 16, 2019).

These continuous reminders of and references to the temporary nature of their collective experience, together with the chronicized precarity of their individual life trajectories, embodies both the attempt by the squatters to build by themselves the stability denied them by housing policies and the political belief that only through struggle and collective action will they be able to gain real housing stability, and entry into the public housing system. Faced with a historically consolidated approach, which allocates perpetually temporary solutions to the social category in question without recognizing the need for a domestic space, the chronicity of the housing emergency also creates within the squatted buildings a stabilization of the squatters' precariousness that becomes a structural fact, but remains precarious, as the risk of eviction without stable alternative solutions remains constant.

For these reasons, after carrying out my fieldwork, I decided to call this peculiar condition ‘stable precarity’ in reference to the living conditions experienced by those who live in the squats associated with the squatting movements in Rome. This term is two-fold in meaning: the first refers to the set of internally generated daily practices and discourses starting from the desire of the squatters to re-signify the neoliberal housing paradigm, and therefore to conquer for themselves a non-market stability that transforms the precariousness of their situation into a dignified and legitimate condition; the second, conversely, sees in chronic precariousness a reason to make a political statement declaring their legitimacy to the outside world, by virtue of the fact that this precariousness could end at any moment due to exogenous causes. Therefore, talking about stable precarity means talking about the squatters' attempts to feel at home in abandoned buildings, while trying at the same time to remain aware that this experience could suddenly end with an eviction: hence the constant effort of the leadership, or “cadres” of the movements (Vereni 2015), to make everyone think of the squat not as a point of arrival, but as a starting point for housing stability that can be gained only through the struggle for housing.

In recent years, precarity has indeed been revisited as it no longer exclusively means being employed in temporary jobs and lacking social security (Pierret 2013). Revived interest in precarity has been seen across the social sciences (Bourdieu 1998; Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Ettliger 2007; Fudge and Strauss 2013; Millar 2014; Standing 2014; Della Porta *et alii* 2015; Schierup *et alii* 2015; Agergaard and Ungruhe 2016). Therefore, nowadays precarization is not only limited to the labor market but can penetrate entire lifeworlds of individuals and groups of people (Butler 2004; Lazzarato 2004; Morini and Fumagalli 2010). Moreover, it can overturn existing behavioral habits and conventions of human interaction (Della Porta *et alii* 2015: 2). Henrick Vigh, whose work is very important in the field of African studies –

although little known in relation to urban studies in Western countries – undertook studies involving young people in Bissau and wrote that, from their point of view, crisis and conflict are almost never seen as passing phenomena. Constant decline has actually led to the emergence of social, economic, political and identificatory decay, with the consequence that critical events are set against a background of persistent conflict and decline (2008: 6). For young people in Bissau, war is no longer seen as an exception but a recurrent event. Vigh therefore states that rather than taking a traditional social science approach to the phenomenon by placing a given instance of crisis in its historical context, as anthropologists we should be able to see crisis as context (Vigh 2006): that is, as a terrain of action and meaning rather than a single episode, which can then lead us to an understanding of critical states as pervasive contexts rather than singular events.



PHOTO 3: Children's shoes in the squat, lined up to dry after being washed in a shared washing machine (Photo by Chiara Cacciotti)

Following this interpretation, if we consider precarity as “a life without a promise of stability” (Tsing 2015: 2) or a state of emergency that is the rule rather than the exception (Benjamin 1999: 248), then the housing emergency for low-income people in Rome can also be defined as a precarious condition that has paradoxically become a certainty, and is usually followed by an attempt to achieve and build stability within a condition of chronic precarity. At the same time, people in Rome can potentially find a response to this need by turning to squatting movements: as Florence Bouillon wrote (2011), contrary to infantilizing and often degrading solutions such as reception centers, squats give their inhabitants a feeling of mastery of the space and a moral appropriation of such space, providing them with both a domestic and a shared space.

Indeed, in Rome there is a consolidated local tradition in representing housing emergency in terms of an undifferentiated and ‘extended’ social body. Most of the time, the housing policy involves providing a temporary roof without simultaneously intervening in other areas that are part of the complexity of life experience of those who are in an emergency situation or housing discomfort, thus making that same roof a totally precarious solution. Far from guaranteeing a right to housing for everyone, such an approach has therefore tended to make that same emergency a chronic condition for a whole slice of the urban population, leading to systematic preferences and exclusions that have then been formalized in policies mostly aimed at the intermediate social strata and, in particular, at workers as the privileged beneficiaries of social housing. This model laid the foundations for what subsequently became the ‘counter-history’ of movements in Rome for the right to housing (Vereni 2015). In fact, talking about chronically temporary housing solutions for migrants and the poor in Rome means talking about those interventions on the institutional front aimed at the more ‘diverse’ sections of the population of Rome:

in the past, the so-called *baraccati*, shanty-town dwellers and internal migrants originating mainly from southern Italy, nowadays, Italians and migrants in economic difficulty and housing precariousness. Two housing alterities that are certainly far from homogeneous in terms of characteristics and needs, to which, however, housing solutions have always been applied with little recognition of these people's legitimate desire to build a domestic sphere – a construction that is socially 'acceptable' mostly if it is achieved through market intermediation.

However, in the past thirty years, both non-European migrants and the so-called middle classes entered these contexts for the first time, thus favoring the rise and development of the three main squatting for housing movements in Rome: the *Coordinamento cittadino lotta per la casa* (Citizens' Committee for the Fight for Housing), founded in 1988; Action, created in 2002 from the *Diritto alla Casa* (Right to Housing) movement that emerged in 1999; the *Blocchi Precari Metropolitan* (Precarious Metropolitan Blocks, that emerged in 2007). The long-term history and the complexity of the experiences outlined above are then a direct consequence of the city's chronic housing emergency. This has consequently led to the current state of stable precarity among squatters, which, from a spatial point of view, generated demand not for new constructions but for reclaiming unused portions of the city, and, from a relational point of view, an everyday normalization of social otherness through which a private space similar to a normal apartment is lived and furnished (Vereni 2013). At the same time, squatters are responsible for co-managing and looking after the common spaces, in other words the public space, within the squat.

When the domestic sphere, and therefore the possibility of being permanently settled, is achievable only through market intermediation, and since this process has also influenced access criteria to social housing in Rome (Salsano 2008; Tosi 2009; Vereni 2015), the alternative for those who do not fulfil any of the preconditions (therefore for those who are part of the housing alterity) is to 'conquer' a domestic space through the act (and process) of squatting. This is the moment when, knowingly or not, they find themselves in a system and a historically consolidated and sedimented practice, although very different from what it was before the arrival of foreign migrants: what remains is the squatting movements' desire to transform individual personal need into a broader collective political project (and subject) that does more than provide a solution to a material problem, but tries to carry on a process of politicization and education that is modeled and forged also from space, with the latter being far from a mere container (Caciagli 2019).

Following the analytical bipartition reported by Carlotta Caciagli (*ibid.*), the system of squatting for housing in Rome corresponds neither to the deprivation-based theoretical approach that sees squats as only an immediate solution to the lack of a roof (Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Cattaneo and Engel-Di Mauro 2015) nor, conversely, to the approach that sees these spaces exclusively as political spaces (Prujt 2012), regardless of the need that is nevertheless present. Instead, in Rome what occurs is a combination of these two poles, within a configuration that subsumes both individual urgency and the attempt to prefigure a sustainable cultural and political alternative to the neoliberal housing model.

An endless liminality

The condition of stable precarity experienced by *Santa Croce/Spin Time's* squatters is therefore an example of crisis as context (Vigh 2008), since it remains precarious even though the people in the squat are trying to inhabit it and to build a domestic sphere for themselves and a project for the city. For this reason, while they are trying to envision and spread a social housing model that could be a potential solution to the crisis, at the same time they are experiencing various ways of feeling at home (or not) in the squatted building, starting from the effects of the crisis as a context in their individual life stories. In fact, "one of the most notable aspects of crisis is that it illuminates how and to what extent our notion of self is intimately tied to the social" and, consequently, "the way in which deterioration in one aspect of our existence will, almost by definition, affect other areas of our lives" (*ibid.*: 15). The precarity as a context from which squatters try to find a way to feel at home, even if only for a brief period of their lives, should make us aware of the relationship between the personal and the social: precisely because crisis can destabilize the way we usually construct ourselves as parts of larger entities. In corroding the constructions of meaning by which the different spheres of our existence are interwoven, it can also trigger an attempt to 'inhabit' that same crisis. Treating this stable precarity as an impersonal phenomenon would therefore make us think of crisis as a value-free transition from one state to another,

while instead when focused on the study of people – and their meanings and understandings – crisis is not a word that can be separated from its connotations on individual lives.

However, after the implementation of the Lupi Decree in 2014², becoming a squatter in Italy has become much more complicated. The measure in question effectively denies residency for squatters. Since residency constitutes the requirement for access to many social rights, for instance, welfare, healthcare, and public housing (Bolzoni *et alii* 2015), from 2014 onwards squatting movements in Rome have been forced to stop squatting new buildings. As a consequence, if the route to becoming a squatter used to begin at the entrance to a new building, where a new space was occupied together with other people in the same housing situation, and thus sanctioned the achievement of the status of squatter for everyone, today, given the lack of availability of space, it is possible to earn that status only in the field, through an incubation period of varying duration aimed at integration into an already existing squatting community.



PHOTO 4: Child squatters (Photo by Chiara Cacciotti)

The entrance requirements can therefore be defined as a rite of passage, which according to Arnold Van Gennep's famous tripartition (1909) could be schematized as follows. First, there is a preliminary phase, a period of segregation from a previous way of life represented by the moment in which the potential squatter turns to an internal office called *Tutela sociale* (Social protection), jointly run by squatters and external activists. Then, if it is established that he or she really needs a space and the *Tutela* approves his or her application, the *Tutela* then needs to discuss this with the *Comitato* (committee), a group of squatters elected annually by other squatters and responsible for the building management. After this step, the application will be discussed again at the squat assembly and at the *Consiglio*, a small internal council where once a week all the *comitati* of the movement's squats meet and where the potential squatter presents him- or herself. Immediately after, the liminal phase then begins, the state of transition

² Legislative Decree n. 47/2014, that denies anyone who squats the right to apply for residency. This makes it harder for people in squats to access basic social services such as a family doctor, and impossible for them to pay for utility bills.

from one status to another in which the squatter is only a temporary guest with a room in the building who begins contributing on a daily basis to the community's well-being and activities. Finally, there used to be a post-liminal phase, which for some coincided with obtaining social housing through the struggle – and therefore exiting the 'squat system' – which today no longer exists, since after the Lupi Decree for a squatter it is no longer possible to obtain a council flat. What now happens at this stage is that the 'candidate' becomes a full-fledged squatter accepted by the whole community, rather than a beneficiary of public housing. Being a squatter, after 2014, has therefore become a condition of permanent liminality: that is to say, as Arpad Szakolczai pointed out, "when any of the phases in this sequence [of separation, liminality and re-aggregation] become frozen, [it is] as if a film stopped at a particular frame" (2000: 220). A spatial 'stretching' of liminality (Thomassen 2014: 14) that is simultaneously accompanied by a precarization process, both individual and social.

To put it another way: whereas people in a situation of housing emergency previously entered squatted buildings motivated by individual need, and left only when they managed to gain a council house through the struggle, in today's squats in Rome the liminal phase is actually frozen, as it coincides with that of 'finally' achieving squatter status, therefore a further extension and chronicization of their liminal housing status compared to the rest of society. Liminality became in this way a chronicized process, a stable period of transition during which, as Bjørn Thomassen has written, "the normal limits to thought, self-understanding and behavior are relaxed, opening the way to novelty and imagination, construction and destruction" (2014: 1). The anthropological challenge then becomes understanding how individuals, as parts of social groups or societies, undergo "chronic transitions", how they live through the uncertainties of the constant in-between and how they eventually come out of it.

If it is true, as Laura Mugnani argues, that the practice of squatting is driven by imagination as it is endowed with a creative character that "contrary to 'fantasy' involves the (often collective) realization of an idea" (Mugnani 2017: 180), then the different meanings that squatters give to their personal idea of home can also be translated into actions and practices with an agency, an ability to act and to feel at home according to one's own personal life project within the community of *Santa Croce*. For many squatters, for example, living in a squat is an action "aimed at seeking recognition" (Manocchi 2012: 160), as it is considered a strategy for obtaining a form of social legitimacy even before a legal one becomes possible (Mugnani 2017: 183); for others, however, living in a squat can also mean an attempt to achieve for themselves the privilege of being invisible (Appadurai 2003: 50). From this point of view, the liminal phase represented by the final achievement of squatter status (and, consequently, by the chronicization of their liminality within an experience of stable precarity like *Santa Croce*) could mean for many the ability to exercise effective power in the city in invisible ways, by having access to a roof, to people, relations and resources that do not necessarily have to be advertised. Squats in Rome, which provide precarious housing conditions but at the same time the possibility of settling down without having to pay rent, represent in this sense for many a guarantee of invisibility, as well as a political practice that legitimizes their condition of material and socio-economic deprivation.

Many of those who feel more comfortable with their current life experience in the squat – both Italians and migrants – already have a chronically precarious housing story, which has often forced them to move from one house to another without ever reaching a satisfactory economic condition that would allow them to escape precariousness. This experience is particularly widespread among singles, who represent the excluded par excellence on public housing lists. For those accustomed to moving from one place to another, as squatters or barely able to afford a rent, the simple fact of living in a place like *Santa Croce* for more than five years can then represent an index of achieved stability and a way to legitimize their social condition. This is the case of Mirko³, a forty-year-old squatter from Rome who grew up in the peripheral *Tor Bella Monaca* neighborhood, where his family managed to squat a council house in the late 1980s. After an adolescence spent either in social centers or travelling the world, Mirko found stability and a partner, with whom he had a son, before separating and finding himself once again in a condition of housing precarity. After a year staying in friends' homes and his car, an acquaintance who lived in another Action squat hosted him there for six months, at the end of which *Santa Croce* was occupied. When he moved to *Santa Croce*, he initially found himself in a new and strange situation but he soon managed to acclimatize and feel at ease:

³ The names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.

At first, I couldn't even imagine what it would be like to live in a place like this... a multiethnic place, with many people and many cultures. But I have to admit that today for me everyone in the squat is like a family. They are part of my family. Even if I didn't bond with many of them, but you know, there is habit, there is the simple fact of having done things together, the demonstrations, the fights against the police ... in other words, we fought for this place, and now I love them like they were my family... I don't know how to explain it. (March 20, 2019)

A process, that of finally feeling himself at home, which was by no means immediate:

In the beginning, I was here as a guy from Rome who grew up in the suburbs, with a certain type of life ... I felt like I was entering a world apart, very different from my reality, from my city. When I was out with my friends I was myself, but as soon as I came back to the squat ... they didn't understand me, they didn't understand me and we didn't understand each other, because, you know ... Peruvians, Nigerians, Romanians, Albanians ... there are so many ethnic groups ... and when I moved in I felt like I was in a completely strange situation. It was strange but also beautiful... I lived it with curiosity, like a new experience, which didn't bother me. I have always cultivated my habits and I continue to cultivate them, including friendships. But here it's home. That is... now, for me, *Santa Croce* is my home, it feels like home. (March 20, 2019)

From a political point of view, the fact that he has always lived in the suburbs and the positive approach he takes towards his current housing situation has meant that in his future housing projects, he fully embraces the cause of Spin Time, specifically that of regenerating the building with the aim of legalizing their experience and transforming the squat into a social housing model:

Like many other people here, I am fighting to get a house in the future. We have a regeneration project, here in *Santa Croce*... a project to regenerate this building... and if in the future things go well, we will take the apartments here, without being moved into a peripheral neighborhood as usual. I am fighting for this and I agree with everything that is moving in this political direction, even if I believe that there are many other people who are perhaps exploiting the situation while it lasts and who will maybe return to their country one day. But I don't care, this is my struggle. (March 20, 2019)

Nonetheless, unlike Mirko, there are many other squatters who do not feel at home at all:

What does it mean for you to feel at home?

Feel at home? *Tener un lugar*. A place where I can move around freely and spontaneously, for which I am responsible. A place where I can say: this is my house because I bought it, because I paid for it with my money. That is why I said that this is not my house, because I am not paying for it! I don't feel I can do whatever I want here because I don't pay, I just live in a community with many other people. (June 10, 2019)

Grace is a teacher from Venezuela who moved to Italy just over a year ago to reunite with her husband, a man who has lived in Italy and in *Santa Croce* right from the start. Grace is therefore one of the few so-called latecomers and has never experienced anything similar, either residential or political, to her current life in the building. When I asked her if she felt at home, she replied that her apartment was a simple arrangement used exclusively for sleeping, as she had no cooking facilities or the privacy of her own bathroom⁴. The fact that her mother-in-law was also present in her family unit, in the room next door that had a kitchenette, meant that all the meals were cooked by her husband's mother. This contributed to making Grace feel she lacked full control over her life and daily activities. It made her feel dependent and deprived of the privacy that only an apartment that she paid for with her own money could guarantee her. For these reasons, the astonishment – as well as the disappointment – of finding herself in such a situation, aggravated by the nominally illegal status of the place, initially shocked her, and it took a few months for her to manage this, by finally accepting her condition and learning how to adapt to it. An adaptation that she defined as a “*doble moral*”:

⁴ In *Santa Croce*, squatters have to share restrooms and kitchens with the other inhabitants on their floor, since they do not have enough space inside their personal rooms.

[My husband] didn't tell me what the situation was. I came here and I said to him, "Oh my god, what have you done! Where have you brought me?" [...] But in the end this place helped me with integration. First of all, because this is a multiethnic place, so to speak, that we share with people of different nationalities, and I have to learn from them every day, to respect them and to work as a team with them, which is not always easy here ... [...] The truth is, I can't afford to pay rent yet. But in the meantime, I'm learning the language, I'm studying, and I'm living here as a first step... but this does not mean that you live badly here! I mean, if you have the possibility of not staying here, it's better. I don't know if you understand me... I feel like a *doble moral*. I try to respect the rules, to contribute as much as I can, and to go on learning from this experience.

So, are you taking this experience as a transitory, momentary experience?

Yes. It is helping me to integrate in the city and to know new things, to learn, because I am... let's say, when one crosses a border, it is as if it were about personal growth. Because every day that I'm here, I wake up and I have to study, learn the language, work hard to find a good job ... but I feel the need to get out of here, to progress. I only see it as a part of this point in my life. (10 June 2019)

The "*doble moral*", in this case, revealed her contrasting feelings about an experience that, on the one hand, she recognized as pedagogical, enriching, and functional for her integration in the city and country that were new to her, but which on the other hand worried her mainly because of its nominally illegal status. While she acknowledged the positive aspects of living in a squat, what seemed to lie behind the fact of not having enough space for herself and her husband, along with the awareness (and hope) that the accommodation would be provisional, was a conception of home linked to a cosmology of values typical of the neoliberal model, where without market intermediation she could never really feel at home. As far as Grace was concerned, the living space of *Santa Croce* was exclusively a daily lived space, since she had no interest in re-imagining it or intervening in a creative way in order to settle down within it.

Although Grace may seem to be an exception compared with the other squatters since she is a newcomer and is not really looking for housing stability in the building, her case nevertheless does represent an example of stable precarity insofar as she is living her current experience in *Santa Croce* as a means to integrate into society in Rome and in Italy, mainly through the daily improvement of her Italian language knowledge and through active participation in the squat's activities, which could also represent a way for her to find new job opportunities. Therefore, her wish to find stability in a precarious situation could be translated of course into leaving the squat but, at the same time, she is living her current housing condition as an act of citizenship (Dadusc *et alii* 2019), and as a formative process towards political subjectivity that could perform and prefigure an everyday practiced citizenship (Ricciò 2011) despite her exclusion from normative citizenship.

From settled to unsettled. Santa Croce/Spin Time Labs

Elena Ostanel wrote that people create urban regeneration when the rights of use of a place are multiplied and directed to different audiences and when space (public or otherwise) becomes an available resource, capable of anchoring processes of empowerment and political activation (2017: 7). However, in order to do this, it is necessary to create a learning process both for institutions and for the varied social actors participating in the urban regeneration practice (*ibid.*). Following this definition, some squats⁵ are trying to open themselves up to the surrounding territory both as a political defense strategy and also as an attempt to accommodate other forms of urban struggles. In this way, they are actually trying to find a new way to legitimate their political and housing experience in the eyes of local citizens and local government, making the squat not a privatized space but a resource available to everyone.

In this regard, Spin Time usually defines itself as a "cantiere di rigenerazione urbana", which could be translated as a self-made urban regeneration process: in other words, a project that is not restricted to guaranteeing a roof over people's heads, but whose ambition is to become an example of hospitality for migrants and a bottom-up social housing model, with the aim of regenerating the entire city and its political culture, regardless of the nominally illegal nature of the experience. This project is motivated

⁵ Besides Spin Time, Metropoliz-MAAM and Porto Fluviale are two other examples of squats in Rome open to citizens (Boni, De Finis 2016).

by the fact that, as we have seen, after the implementation of the Lupi Decree it became harder to consider a squat a temporary experience, since no one who squats in a building can apply for public housing for at least five years (*art. 5 comma 1-bis*); in addition to this, such is the level of demand on council housing waiting lists that the average wait can be up to 18 years (Puccini, 2019).

This institutional stalemate has reinforced the condition of stable precarity of squatters, who, from 2014 onwards, started to live their squatting experience as a long-term one, however precarious it may be. For this reason, also in 2014, Action decided to create Spin Time in order to find a new political instrument capable of extracting them from their stable precarity and subsequently achieve the regeneration and legalization of the building, through recourse to social and cultural activities and services that would also be open to external users.



PHOTO 5: The building (Photo by Chiara Cacciotti)

Indeed, another side effect of the Lupi Decree is that squatting movements in Rome have consequently had to stop squatting new buildings, as they are no longer able to use squat experiences as a means to negotiate public housing for squatters. This situation has therefore made the current route to becoming a squatter more complicated, since the availability of spaces inside squats has fallen. For these reasons, the squatters' determination to stabilize their precariousness through their political experience could also be interpreted as the daily production and refinement of a local moral economy, which is summarized as the "production, distribution, circulation, and use of moral sentiments, emotions and values, and norms and obligations in social space" (Fassin 2009). In this case, since no new buildings are being squatted following the implementation of the Lupi Decree, squatters are constantly demonstrating on a daily basis why they 'deserve' a space in the squat, not through money or buying power as is the case in a normal condominium, but by using the struggle over housing and their contribution to the internal community as a form of payment or commodity money. In this way, they create a local value system based on principles that are to some extent different from the individualistic behaviors typical of competitive market mechanisms although it does borrow some aspects from the market – like having to deserve a space, for example, even though this may be through the struggle and active participation and not through their buying power. This is because, as Fassin pointed out, the moral economy also concerns institutions and neoliberal markets, whether political or economic, and there is never a clear opposition between the 'market' and the 'moral economy' (2015).

This local moral economy, however, is not always interpreted as such by outsiders. Many local and national newspapers often describe it in terms of moral blackmail or even a criminal organization. The squatters' main defense against this representation tends to run as follows:

You have to explain it, you have to explain the rule system we have established for ourselves here in order to live together. Because otherwise, you know... many people, together... without rules this would not be an organized squat, but a place where the strongest tend to win. Here, you cannot prevail if you abuse the rules, you have to do all the things that everyone else does, you have to abide by the cleaning rota and stuff like that, because if you don't, you're politely asked to leave for a week. After all, in standard apartment blocks, you face eviction if you don't pay your arrears, so why shouldn't we be able to do the same? It's not that hard to see the reasoning behind all this: people live well here when they are organized and when there are rules for everyone, not when this kind of thing is left to the discretion of the few (Fabrizio, April 3, 2019).

According to Thomas Clay Arnold (2001), the grounds for politically significant moral indignation do not lie only or even predominantly at the level of economic or cultural conflict. They lie, instead, at the level of specific social goods (housing, in this case), therefore at the intersection of nested sets of meaning and value that are called into question by equally specific changes in circumstances. The local moral economy of *Santa Croce/Spin Time*, together with their internal rules of conduct and their continuous process of redefinition and redistribution of values and meanings associated with “living well”, not only influence their political collective action, but also help them to define the framework of a local common sense or, especially in given historical moments, of a particular political ideology regarding how housing as a social good should be distributed in Rome – that is, as a right that must be earned through struggle and political activism rather than through money or buying power.

One of the most meaningful manifestations of their desire to make their moral economy and their political model of settlement a city-wide reality dates back to the 11th of May 2019, when the building found itself in the international media and political spotlight. This was the day that the Pope's almsgiver Cardinal Konrad Krajewski restored electricity to the building after the power supply had been cut off due to unpaid bills. The squatters then took to the streets to defend the manhole containing the electrical panel to stop the power being cut off again, and two police officers were sent to restore calm. The officers talked to the squatters, who had no intention of ending the sit-in. One of the officers told them: “I truly understand you, really... but society usually takes a particular direction, and we are the guarantors of that direction”.

That statement unconsciously revealed the simultaneous presence of two variants of a moral economy related to housing as a social good. The first, represented in this case by the police officer's words, was very similar to that described by Didier Fassin (2015), where he affirmed that a moral world also existed for institutions and state representatives: while the latter are often regarded as an abstract and neutral bureaucratic entity, Fassin went against this commonly held belief by arguing that their moral economy is instead a situated and naturalized reality, embodied in the work of its agents and inscribed in the issues of its time. However, the second variant – that of the squatters –, in that specific circumstance, demanding that their community be allowed to use electricity at an agreed rate in the name of a local cosmology of values that affirms the legitimacy of their living condition, an opportunity that is in fact denied by the aforementioned Lupi Decree. In this way, they would have been able to guarantee a payment, however minimal, while also enabling their nominally illegal experiment inside the building to keep going.

The function of the protest was to reaffirm the squatters' aim of stabilizing their experience of precarity, by trying to gradually transform it into as legitimate and livable a condition as possible. Nevertheless, immediately after that night, what was a local incident became a national and international political issue. The media turned its social connotations into a broader issue of domestic policy, specifically the dispute between the Pope and the Minister of the Interior Matteo Salvini over migrants. Cardinal Krajewski's was not in fact a random act, as he already knew the building thanks to the activities of a lay nun who helped the squatters on a daily basis. *Spin Time* nevertheless decided to use the incident as an opportunity to open up to the neighborhood and to the city, by welcoming other forms of struggles in an intersectional way and by organizing activities and services for all citizens, not just squatters.

If we consider culture not as a unified system that pushes action in a consistent direction but, rather, more like a “tool kit” (Hannerz 1969: 186-88) from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action, then the *Santa Croce/Spin Time* community of squatters could also be defined as a ‘culture of living together’, since they share a tool kit made of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which

they may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems, like that of using shared housing precariousness as a starting point before transforming themselves into a political subject. In this regard, Ann Swidler wrote that culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct strategies of action (1986) since culture is, according to this interpretation, the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meanings (Kessing 1974). Therefore, Swidler identifies two models through which culture shapes action: settled periods, when culture independently influences action by providing resources from which people can construct diverse lines of action; unsettled periods, when explicit ideologies directly govern action, but structural opportunities for action determine which among competing ideologies survive in the long run.



PHOTO 6: The sit-in, right after the Pope's almsgiver restored electricity to the building (Photo by Chiara Cacciotti)

Squatting and, generally speaking, the 'traditional' system of squats in Rome, intended as both an initial act and as a continuous housing process, was for a long time in a settled period, as it consisted of a set of sedimented actions and strategies and aspects of culture that squatters learned over the years through the struggle and the internal life of squats. At the same time, the squatters' values and moral economy did not unilaterally constitute their mode of action by defining its aims once and for all, but rather the squatters continually perfected the regulation of action within historically consolidated ways of life, albeit dynamic and chronically precarious. As a result of the change in the political scenario triggered by the Lupi Decree and the gesture made by the Pope's almsgiver, the informal regeneration model that Spin Time has since embarked upon effectively instigated the start of an unsettled period, which has seen it transform itself into an explicit and articulated system of meanings oriented towards the modeling of new forms of action and struggle which as yet do not come naturally.

Based on this interpretation, the *Santa Croce*/Spin Time culture and, consequently, their action, reached a turning point that night: they were passing from a settled period to an unsettled period, namely from a phase in continuity with the past to one that occurs in the face of rapid social change. The difference between the two phases could be summarized, then, as the difference between culture's role in sustaining existing strategies of action and its role in constructing new ones (Swidler 1986: 278). A new phase that they decided to welcome and spread across the neighborhood through cultural and social

initiatives and some patrimonialization acts, like that of writing Cardinal Krajewski's name on the manhole cover where he restored electricity, as a distinctive way to memorialize what happened there and why.

Some (precarious) conclusions

The experiences of stable precarity as recounted by some squatters, despite differing greatly in terms of personal trajectories and aspirations, all challenge the idea of 'crisis' and 'emergency' as a temporary disorder, as a momentary malformation in the flow of things. At the same time, the Pope's almsgiver episode has shown how the squat now finds itself at a political turning point, since Spin Time is trying to overcome the condition of stable precarity lived by squatters by opening the building to the territory (including the Catholic Church) in order to legitimize their living and political experience and transform the building into a bottom-up social housing model that could potentially be adopted elsewhere.

By shifting the analytical focus from crisis in context to crisis as context (Vigh 2008), housing precarity in Rome would then become definable as a condition, rather than as an episode. Even if "most of the time we imagine such precarity to be an exception to how the world works", in fact, "precarity is the condition of our time" and for this reason, as anthropologists, "we have no choice other than to look for life in this ruin" (Tsing 2015: 6). Given its state as a discipline strongly rooted in the field, together with a particular attention on theory and policy, anthropology with its ethnographic approach could become the perfect interpreter of the consequences of large-scale global processes on lived life, since these processes are often forged at such a distance from the lives they affect that they appear to be unrelated and indifferent to the effects they produce (Ferguson 1999; Nordstrom 1997, Vigh 2008).



PHOTO 7: The manhole cover where the building's electrical system is found. After that night, it has been 'patrimonialized' by squatters as a place of worship (Photo by Chiara Cacciotti)

Our goal would then increasingly become that of focusing on rendering the social and individual sense of events, through life stories and narratives intended as processes through which people construct a meaningful relationship between their present and, as in this case, their housing future (Appadurai 2013). Ethnographic sensitivity, together with anthropological reflexivity, would allow us to see how people struggle to find their bearings and try to control and balance their precarious lives, producing in

this way future scenarios and terrains of action by using imagination as “an organized field of social practices, a form of negotiation between sites of agency and globally defined fields of possibility” (Appadurai 1996: 187).

The willingness of *Santa Croce/Spin Time*’s squatters to settle down in a precarious context, makes them part of a broader effort to imagine and to practice an alternative housing model, which nevertheless can still be defined as a state of ordered disorder (Taussig 1992). In this way, even a single life story affected by chronic precarity would make us aware of the relationship between the personal and the social, demonstrating to us that an individual story can never be analytically defined once and for all since every life is composed of many overlapping stories. As anthropologists, in making our syntheses we should never lose sight of the complexity of that which we are trying to represent, and consequently avoid interpreting the lives we discover in our fieldwork only as ‘precarious’ and, for this reason, adversely affected by chronic desperation and bewilderment. In this way, maybe, we would start thinking through precarity as something that also makes life possible.

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