

# Generating Solidarity in Diversity: The Case of Housing Struggles in Rome

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/crs](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/crs)**Carlotta Caciagli** 

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## Abstract

The article explores the role of solidarity in housing movement organizations in Rome (Italy). Most notably, it enquires the modalities through which activists try to prevent the housing eviction of precarious urban dwellers, the majority of whom are immigrants. The argument is twofold. First, these practices foster solidarity between migrant and non-migrant locals, contributing to the formation of a new collective subjectivity that brings together individualized local and immigrant inhabitants sharing a need for a roof. Second, this process has an impact on the cityscape as it contributes to mapping alternative models of city construction. This article is based on an extensive participant observation (2016) in the network *Movements for the Right to Inhabit* and on in-depth interviews with activists and experts.

## Keywords

Sociology, Housing, immigrants, solidarity, urban space, urban movements

## Introduction

This article contributes to the debate around solidarity in contemporary collective actions by exploring the case of housing movement organizations. In particular, it focuses on the anti-eviction activities enacted in Rome (Italy) by the Movements for the Right to Inhabit (*Movimenti per il diritto all'abitare*), a network established in 2012 by the longest-standing housing movement organizations in town (Grazioli and Caciagli, 2018). Most notably, the contribution explores the practices through which activists try to prevent the housing eviction of precarious urban dwellers, the majority of whom are immigrants. The argument is twofold. First, these practices foster solidarity between migrant and non-migrant locals, contributing to the formation of a new collective subjectivity; second, this process has an impact on the cityscape by mapping alternative models of city construction.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, and subsequently during the crisis of European border politics of 2015, the concept of solidarity became the object of renewed interest in sociological studies (della Porta, 2018). This interest follows a revived centrality of practices of

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solidarity, with the proliferation of direct social actions also by actors traditionally engaged in contentious forms of political activism (Bosi and Zamponi, 2019). As this special issue documents, the notion of solidarity calls into account a wide range of practices and subjects from social movements to non-profit organizations and volunteers. For this reason, the contours of the concept are blurry and contested, not least because the notion of solidarity is used in scholarship with different ontological and theoretical underpinnings (Bauder and Juffs, 2019). Among the many aspects of solidarity that the social science literature addresses, this article highlights its political and transformative potential. Therefore, I define solidarity as a relational practice, which is generative of political subjectivities, situated in time and space and inventive of new social and urban imaginaries (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019).

Authors in a Marxist-Hegelian tradition explain to what extent solidarity is generative of social and political subjectivities (Bauder, 2019) since it allows people to recognize themselves as sharing the same form of oppression in the workplace (Featherstone, 2015). According to Marxist dialectics, solidarity between workers facilitates the formation of a working-class subject. Recent researches have pointed out the specific role of solidarity for constructing collective identities also in a postindustrial society, characterized by fragmentation in the workplaces and precariousness of labor conditions (Chesta et al., 2019). This article contributes to the understanding of the role of solidarity in collective subject formation by assuming a focus on the spatialities and practices of solidarity. In particular, the article addresses how various types of practices put in place by movements are able to enmesh contentious and noncontentious actions of solidarity (della Porta and Steinhilper, forthcoming) nurturing a hybrid approach. Along with providing opportunities for collective actors, this hybridization also fuels ambiguities since noncontentious practices risk clashing with the protest level of social movement action. Housing struggles in Rome offer several inputs to explore in this direction.

Housing precariousness has characterized the situation in Rome for a long time, linking together many social conflicts (Caciagli, 2019). Since the establishment of the network Movements for the Right to Inhabit in 2012, housing movement organizations have increased their role in the urban arena (Belloni, 2016) and multiplied their social activities in the neighborhoods. Particularly relevant is the anti-eviction struggle carried out by activists in the most marginalized neighborhoods of Rome. Combined with the arrival of precarious migrants over the last years (Maestri, 2019), the economic crisis has led to a significant increase in the number of people who cannot afford housing costs. Additionally, with the retrenchment of the welfare system, housing movements often become the only actors able to provide shelter to this population (Grazioli and Caciagli, 2018).

The anti-eviction struggles usually coordinate various actions oriented at preventing (or mitigating) the effects of dispossession, based on mutual help between squatters, activists, and families who are subject to an eviction order. These practices, reproduced on a daily basis, are helpdesks, pickets, and protest parades. Their combination implicates many difficulties that movements need to deal with. The struggle indeed involves people who differ largely and who have few points in common, often only the mere urgency of shelter. Thus, solidarity cannot draw from common backgrounds based on cultural, social, or racial leanings. Additionally, by preventing people from being thrown onto the streets, solidarity practiced by housing movements risks collaborating with (and substituting) the institutions instead of challenging them. In this sense, the solidarity performed in housing struggles navigates an ambivalent terrain.

The article is based on 'militant ethnography' (Juris, 2007) I conducted in Rome in 2016, with *Coordinamento Cittadino di Lotta per la casa* (*Coordinamento*), the oldest housing movement organization of Rome and nowadays part of the Movement for the Right to Inhabit that is here under analysis. In 2012 *Coordinamento* and the other biggest movement organization, that is

*Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (BPM)*, converged in a broad coalition that is still in force. Although these two housing movement organizations retained differences in terms of internal organizations, their unification under the same network has allowed them to pool their political resources while incrementing capability to intercept the suffering population. Indeed, since the network has been established, the struggle for preventing eviction of families started to gain capillarity in the urban fabric. During the fieldwork, I participated as an activist in anti-eviction struggles and conducted twenty-two semistructured interviews with activists and squatters of Movement for the Right to Inhabit as well as with evicted urban dwellers. In this article, present excerpts of eight interviews. The interviews focused on the social ties, the practices, and the personal experiences of inhabitants. The respondents included persons with and without a history of migration, men and women, and with different degrees of experience in activism.

The article is structured as follows. In the next section I collocate my perspective on solidarity within the broader debate on the issue. In particular, I link my analysis with the debate on the role of solidarity in shaping collective subjects in neoliberal cities and its potential in defining alternative urban possibilities. The third section delves deeper into the empirical analysis of anti-eviction activities, shedding light on practices of solidarity and the challenges they have to address. The fourth section shows to what extent the practices of solidarity in housing movements envisages an alternative model of city construction. Lastly, I provide conclusions and suggestions for further research.

### **Theoretical Premises: A Spatial Perspective on Solidarity**

Despite its extensive use in sociological studies, the notion of solidarity remains a “floating signifier” (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019), often used in an evocative and normative manner with limited analytical precision (Bauder and Juffs, 2019). Therefore, scholars have largely explored solidarity without providing definitions. While different solidarity practices have been mapped and described, definitions are still vague. I base my analysis on the broad definition suggested by Agustín and Jørgensen, which attempts to capture a broad range of variants of solidarity. In particular, they understand solidarity as a relational practice with three features: it is generative of political subjectivities and collective identities; inventive of new imaginaries; and situated in space and time (2019: 25).

According to the Marxist tradition, solidarity does not spread among people who recognize themselves to have the same identity. To the contrary, it flourishes among people who are differently affected by conditions of exploitation (Agustín and Jørgensen, 2019); indeed, it “can connect people who seemingly have little in common” (Bauder, 2019: 3). In this sense, solidarity forges social and political relations but rejects political closure. It does not rely on (and does not aim at) the construction of a homogeneous, collective identity but rather on the construction of political ties between people in the same social conditions, despite their many cultural, ethnic, and political differences (Kelz, 2015).

This reflection gained a new importance with the transformation of capitalism (Harvey, 2012) and the rise of the precariat. Indeed, some scholars pointed out how the atomization of tasks and the absence of a workplace that characterize precarious jobs can inhibit interpersonal relations that are at the basis of collective subject formation (Rogers, 2017). In this fragmented scenario, broad forms of solidarity are considered to have a crucial role in subject formation as they have the potential of bringing together people who lack class identity, on the basis of sharing the same workspace (Standing, 2011). With the changes introduced by de-industrialization dynamics and the dominance of the neoliberal paradigm, the workplace is no longer the most crucial place in which solidarity among the exploited people can be created. This is because of an increase in forms of

oppression related not only to labor, but also to other forms of urban dispossession, such as the impossibility to access affordable housing.

Since scholars have recognized the role of solidarity in the construction of new, postindustrial collective subjects, various studies have scrutinized the urban space, in which precarious conditions and the diversity of actors is particularly accentuated. In particular, contentious spaces linked to movement organizations have been investigated as the places in which solidarity between differently exploited individuals is nurtured. Mudu and Chattopadhyay (2017) speak of an “autonomous solidarity,” referring to relations and practices that are produced in self-organized urban spaces among various types of precarious people, including immigrants, unemployed people, and homeless families. The presence of these alternative places within the city reveal to be extremely important in contemporary times. Indeed, in neoliberal cities and with the postindustrial dynamics, the warehouse is no longer the main place where the members of the precariat come into contact with each other. As recent research has pointed out, connection is mostly achieved by the architecture of urban space, like streets and squares, that in many cases are the workplaces of precarious workers, as for example the food delivery worker (Chesta et al., 2019). In these spaces different types of urban inhabitants get in touch with one another. Therefore, the various urban places can be the spaces in which strong ties between different groups, such as locals and immigrants (Nicholls, 2009), are formed.

Accordingly, the contemporary literature highlights that solidarity has an important spatial dimension. This is not just because practices of solidarity are constituted on different scales that interconnect one another (Jessop, 2002), but also because solidarity is place-based: it needs space to be reproduced on a daily basis. Many authors have addressed the physical proximity as a catalyzer of solidarity (Coleman, 1990). Indeed, proximity in space is traditionally considered as a relevant factor, enabling the formation of social relations among people (Massey, 2004; Nicholls, 2013), and for social movements in particular (Nicholls, 2009). In this vein, the presence in the same space motivates people toward cohesiveness, urging them to translate their dispositions into social and political collective behavior (Nicholls, 2009, 2013). This means that “being physically in common” generates new political possibilities (Routledge, 2017: 56).

The link between spaces and solidarity has been explored not just as the basis for the formation of collective subjects but also as the keystone for prefiguring alternative models of city construction. Interestingly, despite that a decrease in institutionalized political participation at the national level, at the urban scale there is no social apathy. To the contrary, in times of crisis there has been a proliferation of urban activism (Bosi and Zamponi, 2019; Grazioli and Caciagli, 2018). Many authors have shed light on how the diffusion of these locally rooted actions has changed the marginalization of many areas. Many examples of solidarity actions widespread around cities challenge from below the logics of competition and privatization of spaces fueled by the neoliberal paradigm of city construction (Cellamare, 2014).

By means of actions performed in specific places, solidarity also challenges the broad paradigm of society building. People who have come together because they are exposed to vulnerability make the dynamics of exploitation visible and, in turn, unstable and changeable. This opens up spaces for imagining and constructing alternatives (Arampatzi, 2017). As pointed out by Augustin and Jørgensen, “solidarity is contentious and as such a counterhegemonic, social and political mode of action which can unify diverse actors to come together to challenge authorities in order to promote and enact alternative imaginaries” (2019: 35). In this sense, solidarity helps to elaborate a broad “world-making process” (Featherstone, 2012: 18) that pushes people not just to collect resources to fight for their position but also to share a diagnostic frame that locates the model of city construction at the base of their dispossession (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Grazioli and Caciagli, 2018).



## The Construction of Solidarity in Anti-Eviction Practices in Rome

This section analyzes three practices through which housing movements perform anti-eviction activities: helpdesks, anti-eviction pickets, and protest parades. Furthermore, I will point out the tensions emerging in processes of solidarity formation within diverse and precarious populations.

Anti-eviction practices are one of the most important activities of housing movements in Italy. Opposing eviction dates back to 1970, as part of the universe of practices of self-reduction of costs, as for example the self-reduction of rent and bills (Bosi and Zamponi, 2019), used by many social and political actors. Today, the challenges for housing movements in general, and anti-eviction activities in particular, are linked with the complex composition of the population that suffer from housing precariousness. The internal composition of the struggles for housing have been largely characterized by diversity in terms of origin and social background of people involved. The high number of arrivals of precarious migrants at the beginning of the 2000s and the so-called refugees crisis of 2015 (della Porta, 2018; Rea et al., 2019) changed the composition of housing movements, up to that moment predominantly made up of local people coming from the suburban areas of the city. Since then

Immigrants [have built up] (. . .) a large part of the social base: South Americans, Africans and so on. Italians are the minority nowadays. Immigrants suffer severe housing deprivation not just because of economic reasons, but also because they lack the family networks that in Italy absorb the housing precariousness. (Int 1)

Interestingly, however, even if the majority of squatters are nowadays immigrants, they do not represent the most active people in the struggle, who still are Italians. This different position between those simply inhabiting the squats or using their services and those engaged in forms of activism represents a tension in the politics of housing movements.

There are also additional problems. Nowadays, anti-eviction activities involve those people to whom council housing should be allocated but whom the retrenched welfare state fails to assist. Thus, movement organizations provide a service that could mitigate the inefficiencies of the institutions. In turn, this risks neutralizing the conflictual potential that fuels the struggle of housing movements. That is, through their efforts, movements prevent many homeless people from becoming visible in towns, thus diminishing the visibility of a political problem that persists nevertheless. At the same time, the political contention is oriented to forge solidarity between people differently affected by the housing emergency. The activists of the *Movement for the Right to Inhabit* perceive the risks of their action. Indeed, by providing shelter to homeless they risk playing a humanitarian role by simply helping resourceless people. Indeed, most of the people reach the housing movements for the mere urgency of a roof, without aiming at carrying out a political struggle.

Although activists usually refuse this distinction, there is a clear difference between activists and users, between people who are already politicized (leaders, militants who have been part of the movement for many years) and those who approach the movements because they are under a procedure of eviction, are homeless, or decide to stop paying a rent that costs more than 80% of the family income. The existing differences need to be addressed because, as said on many occasions by activists, “we are not a charity group, housing struggle is not about helping poor people, it is about producing new social relations to fight exploitation” (activist speech during a parade, field notes, June, 2016). These new social relations need to rely on communication on a daily basis—in the neighborhoods in which squatters perform social activities.

Since the establishment of the *Movement for the Right to Inhabit*, activists have attempted to adopt an encompassing approach in building up the network of actors involved in different stages

of opposing eviction. In order to tackle all stages of the process of eviction, activists organized three types of practices: the help desks, the pickets, and the protest parades.

### *The Help Desks*

In many anti-eviction activities in Rome, so called help desks represent the first step to resist evictions. They are managed on a voluntary basis by activists, often members of the local squatting movements, and also by many activists that had mobilized already in the 1970s and 1980s, nowadays no longer living in housing movement squats. Their main function is to collect the names of the people under procedure of eviction or of those who want to get information about housing activism. These services are catered to a heterogenous set of local residents in danger of an eviction. This includes undocumented migrants, elderly people, and single men and women who have used up all their financial resources for health problems, unemployed, and retired workers. Some of them are families who have already been on the waiting list for a council house for decades. Albeit in different ways, they are all people the welfare system is not able to respond to. The help desks intercept some of the most deprived member of the population in Rome that is normally not reached by official instruments. This pushed in some cases institutions to look for a collaboration with movements. As an interviewee pointed out: “it can happen that the municipalities redirect people to our help desks; indeed, we have a better perception of what the housing question today looks like” (Int. 2).

This represents a delicate point for the political content of the anti-eviction activities because they risk supporting institutions instead of denouncing their failures. To overcome this problem, one of the tactics is to spread the presence of the help desks around the neighborhoods. Activists thus put up posters, distribute flyers in the most frequented areas of the neighborhoods (such as the metro stations, or the external walls of the submunicipality offices), in order to communicate—“like in a sort of manifesto” (Int.2)—the political struggle the help desks are part of. Moreover, once people get in touch with help desks, activists try to explain what the movement activity is about. As I noted in my field diary:

Once people enter through the door of the help desk, the first thing activists tell them is that they are movements and they are not a charity group not even the Municipality. They tell them that this is a political struggle, this implies illegal actions, difficult conditions. So people can be aware of the fact that house is not simply about shelter, but about a right to demand (field notes, March 2016).

Helpdesks are not only places to attempt to make people aware of the political dimension of the struggle. They are also starting points in building solidarity in anti-eviction struggles. Different motivations are given for participation in helpdesk activities by an activist. Some people told me that they were also under the procedure of eviction and that they hoped that, helping the others, many other people would mobilize in solidarity when their turn for eviction came. Others, who had already been evicted and were temporarily hosted in the territorial squats, were participating because they were forced to by the internal rules of the movements. In this sense, people seem to approach the movement in order to find solutions to personal problems. One of the challenges of solidarity is to re-orient this selfish feeling.

In this direction, as soon as people arrive at helpdesks, activists provide them with transversal information about the rationale of the housing struggle. As an interviewee told me, “We need to make people aware that this is a social struggle: it means that we will not defend their house at their place; rather we defend the houses of each other all together” (Int. 3). Therefore, helpdesks are used also to frame personal needs within a collective framework. Furthermore, helpdesks become

the physical space through which those people excluded from the free market and public housing can get in touch with one another. This has a potentially long-term effect on people's perception of their condition. As emerged during an interview:

The helpdesk has a preliminary goal: to let people become aware of the fact that there is no fault in being poor, there is nothing to feel ashamed of. This is nothing but a crucial point: resistance starts from this awareness. And this awareness can come only if you have the occasion to meet others in your same condition. Helpdesks provide this occasion (Int.4).

Indeed, by getting in touch with one another, people start to experience the eviction not as something for which to be personally blamed. Rather they come to see it as the effect of broader mechanisms that they suffer, as many others, and that are related to the broader paradigm of city construction. This basic understanding is a precondition for the possibility to overturn the stigma (Jasper, 2011) and to develop a "sense of pride and legitimacy" (Nicholls, 2016: 301) linked to the condition of dispossession.

### *The Anti-eviction Pickets*

The second level of activity is enacted once the eviction has been notified and people are supposed to leave the apartment; it consists in organizing solidarity pickets to prevent the police officers from proceeding with the forced eviction. This is the occasion to broadcast the eviction to the entire neighborhood. Solidarity pickets are fundamental to embed a single case within a political, urban framework:

This is a political struggle. It means that the goal is not just to find a solution for a specific family, but also to voice a political issue. To throw a family into the street is not acceptable so we have to resist. . .we cannot let it be easy for them (Int. 5).

The organization of pickets discloses to what extent neighborhoods provide grounds for promoting place-based politics. To perform solidarity pickets, housing movements mobilize first of all the squatters by using particular criteria based on the spatial proximity: inhabitants of nearby squats are mobilized in large numbers. This follows a principle according to which the people who are spatially near are particularly deserving of solidarity. This is due in part to practical reasons, but also to the reference to spatial proximity as a main source for solidarity. As this interviewee testifies:

We oppose all kinds of injustices occurring in any part of the globe. But we cannot engage in all the struggles. For this reason, we start from those ones that are closer. This is the keystone around which to mobilize people who are not in the housing resistance context. The neighborhood is the first dimension in which we get in touch with the others, in which we create social ties. People who suffer recognize the sufferance of the others in their environment. This is a seed to reconstruct something different, a resistant daily life to open new scenarios (Int. 6).

Activists also mobilize those families who get in touch with helpdesks because of their own eviction. Whereas many people initially join solidarity practices because they hope to be helped in turn, pickets encourage people to face all together a difficult and dangerous situation. Indeed, reorienting this selfish feeling within a broad picture is one of the main challenges of the process of solidarity construction.

People involved in the pickets so experience the importance of solidarity in overcoming hardship. As I noted in my field diary, immediately after a picket:

Pickets are dangerous situations that often turn into riots. Both the people who form the pickets and those who are going to be evicted are afraid: the former because they realize that what they are witnessing could happen to them in a few weeks, the latter because they are going to become homeless. This helps in framing the others who are sharing the moments with them not just as the immigrants, the strangers who they are forced to defend, but also as people subjected to the same injustice that they suffer too (field notes, February, 2016).

In this sense different people, moved by different motivations, are gathered within the same physical space: a specific house in a specific neighborhood, assuming the same position in front of an institutional and repressive act. Faced with the risk of physical violence, people start to realize that there is nothing else between the police and themselves than the pickets, that is, only a mass of bodies.

### *Protest Parades*

In case an eviction cannot be prevented, the people making up the pickets shift toward another practice: protest parades. The main aim is to denounce the eviction to the local institutions and, contextually, to attract the attention of neighbors. Activists deem that these strategies have transformative potential upon the surrounding environment. As pointed out by an activist during a protest parade: “This neighborhood is not just a place of evictions and poverty. It is also the place of solidarity, a territory in which people defend each other. It is where people are evicted but also where people resist this abuse!” (public speech of a *Coordinamento* activist).

The aim of the parades is to frame the neighborhoods differently: not as spaces of marginalization but rather as places of solidarity and resistance. Thereby, activists aim to reach out to a larger audience of potentially affected local inhabitants:

This is the only way to draw the attention of the neighborhood dwellers who are not immediately touched by the problem of evictions to the unacceptable modalities with which social issues are managed in their territory. This calls everybody to their responsibilities, because the housing crisis does not just happen; it is manufactured. (Int 1).

Protest parades are crucial for movements in order to go beyond mere engagement in “*welfare from below*” (Paba, 2010). Indeed, it is not unusual that, in strongly market-oriented urban regimes, institutions coopt urban movements in the provision of social services that they fail to provide (Pruijt, 2003: 137). For instance, in this regard, the choice as to whether or not to host families in squats is highly problematic. It places organizations in front of a trade-off between its political role and its social function:

As political movements they have to denounce the institutions, calling them back to their responsibilities. But, at the same time, as social actors basing actions on solidarity ties and mutual help, they have to refuse to leave these people in the street. Accordingly, to host or not to host a family in the squats is a typical dilemma that activists always face, whether they are conscious of that or not (field notes, March 2016).

This trade-off risks producing internal tensions because it forces to choose between privileging solidarity among precarious dwellers the contentious aim of the movement. In some assemblies that emerged as an ambiguity in need of addressing:



We clearly are at an impasse with the anti-eviction struggle. I mean, after the territorial protest, what can we do? When we do not succeed in stopping the eviction, how should we deal with the families? We practice solidarity but we are also a contentious subject. I think this is the moment to openly face this problem and to provide our helpdesks with the guidelines for approaching this issue coherently (*BPM* activist during an assembly).

As this excerpt suggests, the construction of solidarity ties does not only have to do with the reproduction of practices that have sedimented over the years. It rather implies new performances and issues to deal with. I report here the point of view of an activist who has been engaged for many years in the anti-eviction struggle:

Who are the evicted families? We are families who should be recipients of affordable housing, but we are not. And why aren't we? Because there is not a sufficient number of public houses. And why is this? Because the government does not invest in those projects. We need to take a step back. We have to claim council houses! (Int. 7).

This is a perfect example of how the housing struggle can jeopardize the solidarity between people. Indeed, the occupation of public houses would have a greater political impact. At the same time it would have a negative effect on the solidarity ties that can be created within local areas. In fact, the occupation of council houses risks encouraging the local inhabitants to look at squatters as “sly squatters.” This is the term conservative local newspaper *Il Tempo* used (*Il Tempo.it*, August 16, 2015) to refer to the activists: people who overpower the other poor people who “instead of paying the rent as everybody does, steal a right from those other honest citizens” (Int. 4).

In all three steps articulating the anti-eviction struggle, it appears evident that solidarity has politicizing effects on the individuals who approach the housing movements. This politicization is not without controversies and difficulties. Rather, it is marred by many ambiguities that are approached on a case-by-case basis. Two core aspects are central to solidarity as it emerges from the practices of the housing movements. The first one is related to the physical presence of other people as the only way to overcome the costs of participating in housing movements. As this squatter's speech during an interview demonstrates:

I work 10 hours a day, 6 days per week and tomorrow morning I need to wake up at 5 to participate in this anti-eviction picket. I'm really tired but I know that we are here to struggle and we need each other's help. The struggle is a struggle. So, it's hard. But I can afford it if it is to have a shelter for me and for my family. To do it we need to cultivate relations. Yesterday for example there was a picket to defend a family that is going to be evicted. I was working and it was impossible to attend. So I asked \* to go there covering my turn. In this way, the size of the picket is kept. The next time, he can ask me for a favor. (Int.8)

The type of solidarity that the interviewee reveals is not due to political elaboration of people but rather to the necessity of dealing with the movements' rules. Nevertheless, it unveils an important point. Notwithstanding their personal feelings, people are willing to pay the costs of solidarity. Under this perspective, the reasons that move their presence in the struggle are less important than the results. As an interviewee pointed out, “in the end, what matters is that you are there: with your body, your time; it matters that you decide to be physically and spatially there and to stand on the right side of the barricade”. (Int. 8)

The second crucial point has to do with the only real feature that all the participants have in common: material urgency. As I noted in my field diary:

Help desks are approached by many different people. The differences are not just about nationality (South Americans, Algerians, Nigerians and many others) but also about their lifestyles. Many are families but

there are also singles, young people who cannot rely on family networks. Thus, movements ask people to participate in pickets—even risking arrest by the police—to defend people they have few characteristics in common with (field notes, June, 2016)

The urgency of getting shelter that drives people together is a crucial and controversial point. It gives strength to the struggle because it overcomes the distinction between “those who help” and “those who are helped,” but it can also dissolve once people exit from the movements. Interestingly, the potential revolutionary aim of the housing movements is articulated exactly on this point. As expressed by this activist:

It is easy to bring your solidarity to people whom you recognize as similar to yourself. But what is challenging is to construct a collective path with people who share with you a material urgency and nothing else. This is challenging but also the only way to overcome stereotypes and to give solidarity the revolutionary role it has (Int. 3).

The fact that the motivation to engage in practices of solidarity is not driven by good feelings but by a material need is what allows to go beyond the subordinated position of some people, like for example immigrants. Indeed, immigrants are not helped by locals, both locals and immigrants help each other because they are brought together by the same material need. This is why, even if immigrants constitute the largest part of the movement’s social base, the housing struggle cannot be considered an “immigrant housing struggle.” Indeed, people are there not because they are immigrants, but because they are homeless, like local people.

## How Solidarity in Housing Movements Redefines the City

In this section I will explore to what extent the solidarity achieved by the movements for the right to inhabit is prefigurative of new urban imaginaries and have potentiality to mapping alternatives model of city construction, despite the difficulties and controversies. As emerged in the previous section, the attempt to construct solidarity among the housing precariat is enmeshed with neighborhood dynamics. Going a step further, it is possible to say that the process of construction of a collective subject that is triggered by solidarity goes hand in hand with a socio-spatial resignification of the surrounding space.

The effects of solidarity in these spaces are visible, for example, during protest parades as they are inscribed the socioeconomic conditions of the cityscape in a counterhegemonic discourse that frame different manifestations of exploitation as parts of the same whole. Building on a legacy of years of struggles, activists construct and broadcast through choruses and megaphones their narrative of the protest event in such a way that “even those urban dwellers who are not touched by this issue are aware of the fact that their neighbourhoods are also spaces of violence, abuse and populated by people left in the street” (Int. 7). The protests narrate the evictions as a manifestation of institutional neglect of neighborhoods that are abandoned by politicians. The lack of housing, dis-services in public transport, high living costs, and difficulty to access the health care system are all linked together as different facets of the same issue: the exclusiveness of neoliberal cities that worsen the living conditions of the low-income families.

Not just the activists but also the less politicized participants contribute to frame their presence in the neighborhoods using the keywords and categories they hear in assemblies. I reflected on this point in my field diary:

What is impressive is how people in pickets or during territorial parades know what to do without activists having to explain. This is true not just for those who have been part of the movements for many years. Also

the others follow the flow, producing, even if not intentionally, a pervasive mood that can be contagious. Nevertheless, we cannot say that this occurs at any time and under any circumstances (field notes, June, 2016).

Solidarity is not nurtured among people through simply voicing criticism urban conditions. Indeed, as far as I witnessed, protests produce controversial feelings in the local inhabitants not directly touched by housing precariousness:

During protests the inhabitants can be very skeptical. Those people not yet involved in any type of activism are do not trusted about these subjects, they are scared by the police and frequently think “*we pay our rent with difficulties, why don't they?*”. Thus, with regard to these rooted feelings it is not enough to invoke “neoliberal paradigms” (Field notes, May 2016).

The increasing difficulties of people living in peripheral, deprived areas do not lead immediately to the awareness of exploitation, not even to the creation of sense of solidarity to people that are in the same situation. Recent researches have pointed out how economic difficulties have deep effects on the community ties within territories (Bertuzzi et al., 2019). Suffering people tend to find private solutions to problems, even if they recognize their collective dimension. Consequently, it is difficult to create mechanisms for the social reproduction of vulnerable individuals, securing social cohesion. In this sense, a community needs to be constructed before it can organize struggle. To achieve this goal, the point is not how to overcome individualism but how to practice and trigger interpersonal relations that overturn from below. For this reason, this narrative of the deprivation produced by neoliberal city needs to be showed up, more than explained, by activists to inhabitants.

Besides a clear frame for interpreting the different inequalities produced in the cityscape, the daily presence of activists and squatters in the neighborhoods is determinant for the creation of a common feeling. As testified by this activist:

We cannot deal with mainstream narrations, but—unlike journalists and politicians—we can be there: showing our presence, demonstrating that we are not a threat but we are people abandoned and suffering. The only way is not to explain but to show up that we just are people that need to struggle to survive (Int.5).

Indeed, “the point is not to explain, but to reveal to what extent solidarity represents a suitable alternative to individualistic and profit-oriented mechanisms” (Int.10). In this sense, solidarity would be perceived as an efficient way for inhabitants to overcome the daily difficulties that the life in deprived neighborhoods implies. At the same time, “solidarity cannot be exclusive and translated into corporative claims” (Int 9); thus, synergies with other resistance experiences are looked for.

In many cases anti-eviction action has been organized by housing movements with local committees, associations, and social centers. This attempt is well epitomized by the following slogan, usually chanted at events and written on banners: “We are the wretched of the earth and we are coming all together to take back our rights and our dignity.” These alliances give rise to another dilemma. In order to expand their struggle they might have to collaborate with collective subjects that do not share the same political paths. This presents them with another complexity, besides the difficulty of spreading a mutualistic paradigm among people not accustomed to collective action.

Overall, the anti-eviction activity can be seen as a continuous “work in progress” that relates to the socio-spatial characteristics of the neighborhood and more generally of the city. Indeed, although anti-eviction activities are performed at the neighborhood level, they are managed by

movements at an urban level. Actually, the birth of the network has been paralleled by the establishment of an assembly devoted to the management of all anti-eviction struggles across the city. The anti-eviction struggles developing in a specific place of the city are linked with the anti-eviction struggle developing in other parts of Rome, according to the proximity criteria used also to mobilize during the pickets. This follows organizational and political reasons. As pointed out by an activist during an interview:

Rome is a city in which neighborhoods are isolated islands. Well, isolated for all those poor people that need to rely on public transport. The anti-eviction struggles overturn this isolation because solidarity connects territories. Exploited territories are at the core of our action. When there is an urgency in one of the peripheral territories we have a squat, we put this territory at the core of our mobilizations. Whether a territory is marginal or not for the construction of the cityscape, it is not marginal for us (Int.6).

Interestingly, by looking at anti-eviction activities disseminated around the neighborhoods we obtain an alternative map of the city. The marginalized suburbs become the center of a resistant network. In this sense solidarity dynamics, called for and constructed through housing struggles, connect peripheral areas into one whole, cohesive territory, overturning isolation and individualization dynamics of the contemporary cities.

This connection is a sort of reminder for contentious actors: social conflicts develop in solidarity against one common enemy, that is, capitalistic accumulation through the dispossession of precarious individuals (Harvey, 1978). This point has been clearly pointed out by an interviewee:

In big parades we are together with many other social movements, associations, committees. But we do not necessarily all share the same political project. The local social action, to the contrary, is the way we have to corroborate that we are fighting against the same enemy, that we are those people who lived in dispossessed territories and who are struggling to take everything we deserve back (Int. 1).

In sum, the nurturing of social ties and mutualism driven by this struggle while forging a collective subject aims also at changing the configuration of the space, by prefiguring alternative, resistant trajectories in exploited areas. Thus, from being marginalized areas, suffering neighborhoods become the core of social struggles connected to each other. Unlike the political struggle that housing movements performed at an urban level, mainly based on “rare moments of concerted actions” (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015), anti-eviction activities aim at creating a common cultural and political legacy for such reconstructed communities. They nurture “emancipatory practices in the everyday life of the neighborhood” (Arampatzi, 2017: 50). This sheds light on just how far solidarity and space are entangled. While solidarity is fostered through space (that accounts for spatial proximity, the sharing of territorial dispossession, the organization of help desks in the most suffering areas), it also shapes space by inserting opposite dynamics of dealing with insecurity and inequalities, redefining the features of the city.

## Conclusions

The article explored the dynamics through which housing movements construct solidarity among those dispossessed in critical conditions and among individuals coming from essentially disparate backgrounds. My research has confirmed the crucial role of solidarity in the formation of a new collective subjectivity. This role is particularly important in contemporary times, to reconstruct collective subjects not merely based on a work dimension. The article also argued that this reconstructed solidarity contributes to setting up new urban imaginaries, reworking boundaries and marginalization produced by neoliberal models of city construction.

The neoliberal paradigm tends to fragment the different manifestations of an unequal distribution of resources (della Porta, 2015). Instead, the practices linked to anti-eviction struggles are animated by the opposite goal: to connect individuals deprived of means and resources in a shared resistant path. These performances also bring together isolated territories, thus conceiving a new city map, in which marginal and suffering areas become the core of an alternative city based on solidarity relationships. In this sense, the anti-eviction struggle overturns the depoliticizing effects of the neoliberal paradigm on poor, working people (Nicholls, 2016), triggering politicization processes of both individuals and spaces. I have pointed out the ambiguities and difficulties of the process of building solidarity. People dispossessed of their houses can be reorganized into “communities that organize struggle” (Arampatzi, 2017). Nevertheless it is important to acknowledge that these communities are exposed to many aleatory dynamics and trade-offs between social and political dimensions.

The challenges nowadays for both activists and researchers are analytical and political ones. First of all, we should explore more in-depth the role of solidarity in the construction of other types of urban collective subjects. In particular, we should inquire the extent to which solidarity can play a role in the construction of a broad collective subject based on housing and other forms of dispossession. Second, we should go a step further in the exploration of the link between space and solidarity construction. The alternative model prefigured by movement organizations has not yet been achieved. The analytical and political efforts should go in this direction: of understanding how these alternative imaginaries can become “real, concrete utopias” and effective new models of space organization.

### Author's Note

Carlotta Caciagli is now affiliated with University *Luiss* Guido Carli of Rome.

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## Interviews

- Int. 1** BPM activist, Rome, April, 2016.
- Int. 2** *Coordinamento*, activist, Rome, March 2016.
- Int. 3** *Coordinamento* activist, Rome, April 2016.
- Int. 4** *Coordinamento* squatter, Rome, February 2016.
- Int. 5** BPM activist, Rome, May 2016.
- Int. 6** *Coordinamento* activist, Rome, April 2016.
- Int. 7** Evicted urban dweller, Rome, May 2016.
- Int. 8** Evicted urban dweller, Rome, June 2016.