CSPS

Working Paper Series

1

issue 1
2011

University of Salento

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Which models of democracy?
Internal and external decision-making
processes of Italian Social Centres
in a comparative study

Center of Studies on Politics and Society - Working Paper Series

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Center of Studies on Politics and Society

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Which Models of Democracy?
Internal and External Decision-Making Processes of Italian Social Centres in a Comparative Study

UNIVERSITÀ
DEL SALENTO

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Which Models of Democracy? Internal and External Decision-Making Processes of Italian Social Centres in a Comparative Study

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ABSTRACT: In this article are presented the findings of a research in progress on Italian social centres, defined as autonomous groups set up by left-wing radical activists (mainly students and unemployed youth), who occupy and/or self-manage unused buildings in the cities, where they organize political campaigns, social and countercultural activities. In particular the research is focused on their practices and conceptions of politics and democracy, related to both their internal decision-making and their external interactions with other groups and organizations within broader social movement decisional arenas. Two empirical cases, the main and long lasting social centres in Catania (Sicily) – the CPO *Experia* and the CSA *Auro* – are studied and compared, proposing and applying a reworking of the analytical framework of models of democracy within social movements: the *Deliberative* model and the *Assembleary* model are here conceived as the opposite poles of a continuum in which social centres can be placed, including two intermediate mixed models (*Deliberative/Assembleary* and *Assembleary/Deliberative*). The results of the empirical research, carried out by participant observation, documents' analysis and semi-structured interviews, show as the more radical CPO *Experia* adopted a Deliberative model in the internal decision-making ("inside") and an Assembleary model in the external interactions ("outside"); while the more moderate CSA *Auro* can be placed in the intermediate points of the continuum which correspond to the mixed models. The dissimilar properties of the two social centres investigated, regarding the main dimensions of the typology used, allow to identify the variables that explain possible differences in decision-making processes. In fact, the comparison shows as the diverse models of democracy adopted by two social centres depended on their different main ends, collective identities and political-ideological orientation.

1. Introduction.

In this article, the results of an ongoing research on 'Squatted and/or Self-Managed Social Centres' in Italy are presented, with particular focus on the Social Centres' practices and conceptions of politics and democracy, regarding both their internal decision-making and their external interactions with other Social Movement Organizations (SMOs), within broader decisional arenas.

The Social Centres – about 250 have been active in Italy over the past 25 years, especially in urban areas – have been defined as autonomous groups set up by left-wing radical activists (mainly students and unemployed youth), who occupy and/or self-manage unused buildings in the cities (based upon a conception of free spaces), where they organize political campaigns, social and countercultural activities; territorially rooted, they contest the moderation and bureaucratization of environmental associations and political parties, proposing radical forms of action and participatory organizational models (della Porta and Piazza 2008: 43; see also della Porta 2004: 14). Regarding this feature, the organizational modes of Social Centres have been defined as "examples of successful direct democracy in non-hierarchical structure and may provide alternative options to the bureaucratic organization of so many aspects of social and political life" (Mudu 2004: 917). If squatting and self-managing vacant buildings represent the identity traits of the Social Centres, their repertoire of actions includes other unconventional forms as symbolic protests, pickets, road and railway blockades, raids in institutional offices, unauthorized demonstrations, sometimes ending in clashes with police, etc.

Between the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the new millennium, a new generation of scholars has begun to study the social centres (Dines 1999; Berzano and Gallini 2000; Ruggiero 2000; Becucci 2003; Mudu 2004; Membretti 2003, 2007; Montagna 2006, 2007), notwithstanding the phenomenon is quite older, as will be explained in the following pages. Until this period, the social centres had only been object of a pioneering study in the Milan area (Grazioli and Lodi 1984), journalistic enquiries (Adinolfi *et al.* 1994) and some attempt of "self-research" (*conricerca*) carried out by the same activists (Consorzio Aaster *et al.* 1996).

The area of the social centres has also been studied within the recent researches on the Global Justice Movement (Andretta *et al.* 2002; della Porta *et al.* 2006), and it could be considered the most important radical sector of the movement in Italy – quantitatively and qualitatively – for its effective

contribution towards mobilizing thousands of people in demonstrations and meetings against neo-liberal globalization, especially in protest against the 2001 G8 summit in Genoa. These studies have pointed out as the social centres "are also very heterogeneous in cultural background, objectives and forms of action" (della Porta *et al.* 2006: 41), dividing the area in a more moderate sector linked to the Disobedients' movement, and in a more radical sector joined in the Network for Global Rights (*ibid.*: 42; see also Berzano and Gallini 2000).

Nevertheless, some researches mentioned before have highlighted that the growing heterogeneity of the area of social centres has become always more complex and diversified in the last twenty years. If at the beginning of the 1990s "there were two main groups, one of which was close to *Autonomia*… while the other was closer to anarchical movements" (Mudu 2004: 934)[1], the social centres' area is currently and continuously split into several groups and networks, very fluid and unstable. Here I propose a typology of the Italian SCs, which is a reworking of models previously elaborated by other scholars (Dines, 1999; Montagna, 2006), based on their political and ideological orientation, the networks/areas they belong to, the aims pursued and activities carried out (political, social, countercultural), the campaigns and issues faced, the legal status (occupied or assigned), the attitudes towards institutions (hostile, pragmatic, strategic).[2]

a) the *Anarchists* and *Libertarians* who, although divided among themselves in different networks, 'refuse any kind of formalisation of their structures and dialogue with state institutions, but also with movements that they judge too moderate' (Montagna, 2006: 296; Berzano *et al*. 2002); these social centres are always illegally occupied and political/countercultural activities are carried out.

b) The ex-*Disobedients*, who adopt Negri's theorizations on the "multitude"; they entertained fairly relations with local institutions and were particularly close to PRC[3] until 2004 (Mudu, 2004: 934), when they broke

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[1] It is necessary to precise that already in that period there were different political positions within the area of the *Autonomia Operaia* (Worker's Autonomy) between the social centres that refused any relationship with state institutions and those that accepted it.

[2] The typology is a work in progress, because of lack of information about some social centres and the networks are very fluid and loose - they are formed and dissolve very quickly - linking also other type of grassroots actors (committees, collectives, groups, rank-and-file unions, etc.).

[3] Party of Communist Refoundation. Some of *Disobedients'* leaders have been elected to the Municipal Councils of Milan, Rome, Venice and to the National Parliament.

with left parties and radicalized their forms of action; their attitudes towards institutions oscillate between strategic and pragmatic, and many social centres are officially assigned.

Table 1. Typology of Social Centres

Ideological orientation	Network/ Area	Aims/ Activities	Campaigns/ Issues	Legal status	Attitude towards Institutions
Anarchism	Anarchists-Libertarians	Political, countercultural	Antimilitarism, repression, environment, cultural/editorial	Illegally occupied	Hostile, closure
Negri's theory (Multitude)	Ex-Disobedients (Noth-East SCs)	Political, social	Citizenship income, no-copyright, precariousness immigration, welfare from below, Lulu, militarization, university	Officially assigned	Strategic, negotiation
Marxisms/ Leninism	Antagonists (Autonomists, Antimperialists); Leninists; Revolutionary communists; Non-Aligned	Political, social, countercultural	Anti-fascism, internationalism, repression, labour, grass-roots unionism, housing, Lulu, university	Illegally occupied; Officially assigned	Hostile, closure; Strategic, negotiation
Non-ideological/ heterogeneous	Non-Aligned	Political, countercultural	Citizenship income, precariousness, new rights, immigration, anti-fascism, media-communication	Officially assigned	Pragmatic, strategic, negotiation

c) Then, the areas and networks which base their political analysis on Marxist or Leninist class categories: the *Antagonists*, the Antimperialists, the SCs linked to *Autonomia*; others with *Leninist* leanings (2003-4 "*Europposizione*"), and the *Revolutionary Communists* who refuse any relationship with state institutions and are considered the most radical SCs; within these areas usually SCs are illegally occupied and have hostile attitudes towards institutions, but some can be officially assigned and keep strategic relations with local administrations; further, social activities addressed to the neighbourhood in which the centres are located are carried out, beyond the political and/or countercultural ones; besides some Marxist SCs are not aligned to any networks.

d) Lastly, there are *non-ideological* SCs or *heterogeneous* ones, in which different ideological leanings coexist; they are *Non-Aligned/Affiliated*, because do not belong to any of the former networks and include SCs both with a more political orientation and a more countercultural one (Montagna, 2006); usually they are more moderate and have pragmatic or

strategic attitudes with institutions in order to obtain the official assignment of the premises.

2. Models of decision-making: the framework.

Considering this political-ideological fragmentation, I wondered if all social centres shared similar types of decision making, notwithstanding their differences. The existing researches have been less focused on this feature, except for those concerning the social centres belonging to the *ex-Disobedient* sector. In particular, as far as the conception and practices of democracy are concerned, the use of the deliberative method in the internal decision-making process of Disobedients emerged, as Becucci stated: "The deliberative method… within the Assembly… does not use the system of the count of ayes and contraries, but is based on the search for consensus and tendential unanimity… the Disobedients' movement prefers the search for consensus. In the case there be positions that do not give shared solutions, the under discussion problems are momentarily suspended to be afterwards faced" (2003: 90).

But, what about the other social centres? Are their political conceptions and practices inspired to deliberative democracy too, or they follow other models? Which are their methods adopted, both in internal decision-making and in the external decisional processes through the interactions with the other SMOs within broader movement decisional settings? Which are the dynamics and mechanisms characterizing their decisional processes?

In order to answer these questions, first I have considered the practice of deliberative democracy that, according to the scholars who are studying this issue, "refers to decisional processes in which under conditions of equality, inclusiveness and transparency, and a communicative process based on reason (the strength of a good argument) are able to transform individual preferences, leading to decisions oriented to the public good." (della Porta 2006, 2; della Porta and Diani 2006, 241).

Nevertheless, because deliberative democracy is not the sole practice adopted by global movement organizations, I have checked if the decision-making, both internally and externally, of the social centres investigated, corresponded to other types or models of democracy. The typology elaborated by the *Demos Project* group on democracy within the GJM, coordinated by della Porta (2009), in fact regards the different models of decisional process adopted by diverse groups and organizations belonging to

the movement; in particular, the version suggested by Andretta (2007: 116-120), proposes four models of democracy, by crossing the two dimensions of the type of participation (indirect with delegation upward *vs.* direct without delegation) and of the decision-making method (vote or strategic negotiation *vs.* consensus) adopted for the treatment of preferences (aggregation *vs.* transformation) in the formation of political choices: a) *Associational Model* (indirect participation and preferences aggregation); b) *Assembleary Model* (direct participation and preferences aggregation); c) *Deliberative Representation Model* (indirect participation and preferences transformation); d) *Deliberative Democracy Model* (direct participation and preferences transformation). Nonetheless, the two models based on delegation upward (the Associational and the Deliberative Representation ones), are in my opinion useless for my purposes, because social centres have always been characterized by direct democracy, the refusal of internal and external delegation and the denial of formal representation (Piazza 1995; Mudu 2004; Montagna 2006, 2007).

Then, their decision-making should oscillate between the Deliberative and the Assembleary models. In fact, according to Andretta the groups of the anti-capitalist left, whitin which the social centres play an important role (*ibid.*: 127), seem to prefer the deliberative model, surprising for the poor inclination towards the assembleary model which should traditionally have inspired them (*ibid.*: 129), but thus confirming the previous researches (Becucci 2003).

Nevertheless, the two remaining models could be too rigid, reductive and not always realistic, according to a "black or white" logic, in order to describe and explain empirical cases, because in the reality it is likely that their dimensions not are always mutually exclusive but sometimes, if not simultaneously, probably successively present during the processes. Thus, because decision making is a process and not a single act, and therefore changes can occur during it, I have considered the two models (deliberative vs. assembleary) as the opposite poles of a continuum in which the real decision-making of the social centres can be placed: the proposed models are conceived indeed as ideal-types and the empirical cases can be more or less close to them.

In order to facilitate the analysis and the empirical check, I have thought to introduce two intermediate models regarding the cases in which Deliberative and Assembleary Democracy are not the exclusive practices adopted in decision-making processes. Thus, we will have four models,

starting from the Deliberative pole, along the continuum, towards the Assembleary one. Moreover, I have outlined two versions for each model, one regarding the internal decision-making of the social centres (the 'Inside'), the other concerning the external one (the 'Outside), where the unit of analysis is the way in which their activists interact, as a unitary actor, with other SMOs within movement arenas during the decisional process, and not the whole decision-making of these settings.

a. Deliberative Democracy Model.

INSIDE: The process is always deliberative: consensus is the decision-making method and preferences transformation occurs when decisions, unanimously, are taken; when unanimity is not reached, preferences are not aggregated (never vote nor strategic negotiation among different positions), no decision is taken, issues under discussion are momentarily suspended to be afterwards faced. Notwithstanding, if a unanimity decision is impossible to take on issues considered fundamental by activists, that can entails an internal split and the exit of the dissentients from the group.

OUTSIDE: activists always search for consensus and are incline to transform their preferences, but never aggregate them. They accept only unanimity (never strategic negotiation) but not majority decision (never voting). Not always a decision is accepted.

b. Deliberative-Assembleary Democracy Model.

INSIDE: The process is mainly deliberative (the rule), but it becomes assembleary when unanimity is not reached (the exception); in any case a decision must be taken, thus when the preferences are not transformed, they are aggregated by strategic negotiation (compromise or agreement) or by voting (majority decision).

OUTSIDE: activists usually search for consensus and are incline to transform their preferences, but when unanimity is not reached they aggregate them and accept a shared solution[4] - compromise or agreement - (by strate-

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[4] I have not used in these models the term 'shared solution' (or shared decision) as synonymous of 'unanimity decision', in order not to make confusion: the former means 'agreement' or 'compromise' as the outcome of a strategic negotiation among actors that aggregate their preferences, while the latter means a decision unanimously reached by the preferences transformation.

gic negotiation) or majority decision (by voting). A decision is always accepted.

c. Assembleary-Deliberative Democracy Model.

INSIDE: The process is mainly assembleary (the rule), but it becomes deliberative when fundamental issues are faced (the exception); usually preferences are aggregated and decisions taken by voting or strategic negotiation, but some issues (considered very important for the survival of the group) require unanimity and thus preferences are transformed (even to avoid internal split and the exit of minorities).

OUTSIDE: activists usually vote or strategically negotiate their positions with others to find a shared decision (compromise or agreement). They are incline to keep aggregate their preferences (they can try to transform those of others), but sometimes (on certain issues) they transform their own preferences to reach unanimity decisions. A decision is always accepted.

d. Assembleary Democracy Model.

INSIDE: The process is always assembleary: voting is the decision-making method and preferences aggregation occurs entailing the formation of majorities and minorities. Shared decisions (compromise or agreement) can be taken without voting, only by strategic negotiation among different positions.

OUTSIDE: activists always vote or strategically negotiate their positions with others to find a compromise or an agreement. They keep aggregate their preferences, but never transform them (they try to transform the preferences of others and to aggregate them to their own), nor accept majority decision when a shared solution is not found. That can entails the exit from the arena. Not always a decision is accepted.

My initial hypothesis was that all social centres shared an internal decision-making according to the logic and the mechanisms of the Deliberative Democracy Model, whereas the practices of their activists, in the external decisional processes, followed those of the Assembleary Democracy Model. In fact, on the basis of the previous researches, every social centre seemed to be characterized, 'inside', by the exclusively adoption of the

consensual method considered "the only one accepted by everyone" (Romano 1998; Mudu 2004: 926), and by decisions unanimously taken in order to make choices shared by all members; on the 'outside', on the contrary, social centres occupants tried, on the basis of the strength relationships with the other groups, to convince others to share their positions or to strategically negotiate some compromised agreements, without however questioning their political choices.

In order to test this hypothesis I designed my research around the binary comparison of two cases very different between them, that is two social centres with dissimilar characteristics (type of activities carried out, political affiliation, ideological orientation, attitudes towards institutions, etc.), to check if they, notwithstanding their numerous differences, had similar decisional processes.

For this reason I have selected two social centres in the same city, Catania in Sicily, with the most different characteristics: a) *Experia*, a political squatted social centre, belonging to the most radical national network (Revolutionary Communists), which refuse any contact with public institution; b) *Auro*, a moderate countercultural and non-affiliated social centre, whose premises have been officially assigned by local institutions. I focussed mainly, albeit not exclusively, their politics and democracy conceptions and practices of both their internal and external decision-making with other social movement organizations, especially within the local movement coordination.

Nevertheless, as we shall see in the following pages, the findings of the research have provided unexpected outcomes, at least those regarding one of the cases studied, entailing an explanation through the procedure of re-identification and/or cultural re-collocation (Pizzorno 2007a: 66-70); that is the reconstruction of the meaning of actions, identifying the real ends (re-identification) and/or beliefs and information (re-collocation) of the actors, which are different from those we had initially supposed. Explanation here is not pursued singling out constant relations between variables, as in Most Different Systems research design, but understanding and interpreting the meaning of actors' actions (*ibid.*: 70-82).

The research is based on three principal sources: a period of participant observation during the internal meetings of the social centres and the local movement assemblies; the analysis of self-produced documents and internet websites; above all, a set of semi-structured interviews with the social

centres' activists, serving as my key-informants, in order to understand the meaning of their practices and being able to interpret them.[5]

In the following pages, first I will briefly trace the long history of social centres in Italy, underlining their common features and differences, their phases and transformations throughout the years till the present time (par. 2); then I will analyse the phenomenon of squatting in Catania, reconstructing the history, the political conceptions, the activities and campaigns, the 'inside' and 'outside' decision-making of two social centres: *Experia* (par. 3.1) and *Auro* (par. 3.2). Finally, I will make some conclusive remarks returning to the hypothesis outlined above and discussing them in particular from a comparative perspective.

3. The Social Centres in Italy: a long history

Social centres' squatting in Italy has its roots in the mid-1970s when in some urban areas, mainly in Milan, groups of young people (above all students, unemployed and under-employed), namely *Circoli del proletariato giovanile* (proletarian youth clubs), "started a process of 'claiming the city' through widespread squatting of public spaces and the occupation of empty buildings" (Ruggiero 2000, 170). Most of these groups were linked to the *Autonomia Operaia* (Workers' Autonomy), a revolutionary communist movement set up by "a federation of variously sized and composed collectives which urged into action thousands of people and managed to gain the support of numerous intellectuals" (Mudu 2004: 920). Those collectives and groups shared a common paradigm based mainly on two political conceptions and on the radical actions related to them: a) autonomy as independence of the working class from the capitalistic organization of labour and society, synthesized in the 'refusal of work', conceived not only as denial of salaried work, but also as counter-power and resistance against it; b) autonomy as independence from the organizations of workers' movement, unions and left-wing parties, that is the refusal of delegation and formal representation towards party system and representative democracy (Piazza 1987). Therefore, first-generation social centres was only a part of an overall anti-institution movement (Mudu 2004; Piazza 1995), whose decline at the end of 1970s "coincided with the growth of violent protest and armed groups within the extreme left, resulting in mass arrests and voluntary exile

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[5] The data were collected between 2004 and 2008 and the results con considered valid until the eviction of CPO Experia on 30 October 2009.

for many militants" (Ruggiero 2000: 171; 1993). Some social centres, however, continued to exist after this date, keeping a low political profile and "with the support of non-Marxist groups, including the Punk movement…. they created the background for the birth of the second-generation Social Centres" (Mudu 2004: 921; Consorzio Aaster et al 1996; Dazieri 1996).

In fact, it is just between the second half of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s that the area of social centres achieved a great spread and diffusion, with more than 100 squats in the great urban areas, and in the medium and small-size towns, all over Italy. That period was called by the same occupants the "*exit from the ghetto*" (Dines 1999, 93), that is the end of a long period of marginalization and social rejection, symbolically represented by the logo adopted, a flash of lightning that breaks through a circle (Mudu 2004: 923; Tiddi 1997). In particular, between 1989 and 1990, a turning point can be identified in the second-generation social centres evolution process, through two events: the unexpected resistance of the occupants to the evacuation of the *Leoncavallo* squat by police in Milan, in 1989, that was extensively covered in all media, thus becoming the symbol of all social centres in Italy; the university movement called "the Panther", that mobilized a lot of students who successively occupied numerous social centres all over the country (Dines 1999: 94).

The beginning of the 1990s saw the apogee of social centres. In that period we can identified a social movement as a whole, because the social centres were involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents (the state institutions), linked by dense informal networks, shared a distinct collective identity and solidarity, with the frequent use of protest (della Porta and Diani 2006: 20). As a matter of facts, "a sense of national unity was found: national assemblies were held to debate political tactics and the occupants regularly crossed all aver the county to participate demonstrations in solidarity with other social centres threatened of evacuation" (Dines 1999: 94).

The common features shared by all social centres, which formed their political conceptions and practices, were:

a) the *illegal occupation* of disused buildings through direct action, conceived not only as the sole way of obtaining a denied public space to self-manage without external influences, and of drawing attention to the waste of public resources and the high social costs of building speculation (Mudu 2004), but also as political value, because breaking the law had the meaning of breakdown of "the rules of the game", considered as expression of

dominant class interests (Piazza 1995); in a leaflet of the beginning of the 1990s, the illegal occupation was claimed as a legitimate practice: "We illegally squatted an abandoned public building. We illegally removed it from the state of utter neglect in which it was. We illegally redelivered it to thousands youths… squatting a new social centre we want to claim again the legitimacy of this practice"[6];

b) the *self-management* as the internal organisational principle, based on direct democracy, the refusal of delegation upward, both internally and externally to parties and unions, the refusal of representative democracy (Montagna 2006; Piazza 1995), the rejection of any kind of bureaucratic hierarchy, and the adoption of horizontal and participative forms of decision-making process (Montagna 2006; Andretta 2004). Every decision was taken in weekly meetings open to the public through the consensual method; as everybody was allowed to speak and the search for unanimity could be difficult, conflict was the rule and the proceedings were often very tiring, but this organizational mode was the only one accepted by everyone (Mudu 2004: 923; Romano 1998);

c) the social centre as a *social aggregation* venue for the squatters, and for the inhabitants (above all youths) of the neighbourhood and/or of the city in which it was located. The 'sociability' (Ruggiero 2000), i.e. the desire to be together with other people outside costly commercial circuits, in a 'de-commodified space', was a need/right claimed by the squatters (Mudu 2004; Maggio 1998), who engaged themselves in countercultural activities (music, theatre, video, etc.) and in the self-production of records, books, magazines, handcrafts and so on (Piazza 1995; Montagna 2007);

d) the *self-financing* as the way to find material resources for their activities, by selling low-price food, snacks and beverages during concerts, parties, cultural and political initiatives (Mudu 2004), or by voluntary subscriptions and self-taxation (Piazza 1995); all activists were volunteers and their work was not paid.

In spite of the common traits, already in that period there were important differences among social centres, and sometimes also within the same squat, which nevertheless did not prevent collective solidarity and adhesion to the movement network. The main differences concerned their ideological orientation (anarchist, autonomous, communist, non-ideological) and their activities whether countercultural and/or political. As regards the latter di-

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[6] C.S.O.A. Guernica, *Ma chi ha detto che non c'è*, c.i.p., Catania, May 1989.

mension, some social centres emphasised the innovation of cultural languages, the alternative use of communication and information technology, the promotion of independent music and alternative lifestyles (Wright 2000; Montagna 2006), others were more engaged in promoting and organizing social struggles and political campaigns.

These differences will be destined to keep and to increase in the following years, coupled with another divergence which arose in 1991-92, closing one phase and opening another one, characterized by the hard debate inside the social centres movement on their role and their relationships with state institutions. On the one hand, there were social centres which pragmatically accepted political mediation with public institutions, opening negotiations with local governments in order to officially assign the occupied buildings to the squatters and, on the other hand, those which refused that mediation and opposed any such contact in principle. These opposite political positions towards institutions could be explained by the different perspectives and strategies of the squatters. In the first case, the relationship with institutions were seen as a tactics in order to allow the consolidation and the social rootedness of the social centre, or as the only way to reach the main goal of keeping the occupied buildings through its legalization. In the second case, the refuse of political mediation with institutions, was a value which oriented the political practice of the occupants, because the social centre was not seen as an end, but a starting points or intermediate stage of a larger 'revolutionary path'; the 'conservation' of the squat was not the strategic target, but its use as a mean to increase social and political conflicts on the territory (Piazza 1995).

As a consequence of that political rift inside the movement, 1993 marked the beginning of negotiations between municipalities and some "Social Centres for the legalization of squat… By 1998, about 50% of the existing Social Centres had entered into agreements with the private or, more often, public owners of the squatted properties" (Mudu 2004: 923; Eurispes 1999). As a consequence of that process, the social centres which use premises made legally available by local administrations, changed their name from 'CSOA' (*Centro Sociale Occupato Autogestito* – Self-Managed Squatted Social Centre), adopting the acronym 'CSA' (*Centro Sociale Autogestito* – Self-Managed Social Centre).

In 1994-1995 and in the following years, the political divisions increasingly deepened and enlarged, mainly in the area of *Autonomia*, when, in part influenced by the Zapatist revolt against the Mexican government in

Chapas, some of the greatest and oldest social centres[7] set up a movement, called first the *Invisibles* and then the *White Overalls*, which opened to the dialogue with institutions, to propose strategic alliances with the left-wing radical parties (PRC and Greens), presenting their own candidates to the local elections, and to interact and cooperate with centre-left municipal administrations in various institutional projects related to the provision of welfare services. Regarding the latter issue, called '*welfare from below*' by the proponents, some social centres began to receive public funds and previous voluntary activities were turned into services delivered by more formal organizations, cooperatives and associations, set up by activists regularly paid as professionals (Montagna 2006). In parallel, as a consequence of the debate on the 'social firm' geared by *Leoncavallo*, the life-politics relationships, within some social centres, prompts experimentation with ways of obtaining income while establishing alternative life styles, producing a small-scale independent economy which feeds a parallel market where other commodities and services are also available (Ruggiero 2000: 176).

This evolutionary process, masterminded by the *White Overalls* movement, was hardly criticized by the other more radical social centres (anarchists, revolutionary communists and the remaining sector of *Autonomia*) which accused them of 'reformist drift'; in fact, their activists reaffirmed that militancy should be volunteer-based (Montagna 2006) and that legalization of squats, relationships with institutions and receiving public or private funds were incoherent with the principle and practice of self-management (Berzano and Gallini 2000: 60), because it would not have ensured complete independence of the social centres (Mudu 2004: 926; Membretti 2003).

In September 1998 there was the event that formalized the political fracture inside the social centres movement, when the squats belonging to *White Overalls* signed the so-called 'Milan Charter'.[8] Since that date, but probably even before, we cannot consider the social centres as a movement

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[7] *Leoncavallo* in Milan, *Corto Circuito* in Rome, and the North-East social centres *(Pedro* in Padua e *Rivolta* in Venice).

[8] This document contained a set of primary goals including the following: "1) The right of male and female undocumented migrants to freely circulate outside 'Temporary Detention Centres'. 2) Decriminalization of offences associated with exercise of denied social rights. Decriminalization of substance abuse… 3) The introduction of guaranteed minimum citizen's incomes" (Mudu 2004, 939).

as a whole, but a set of different and separated national networks with a low, or not existent, degree of coordination.

The years of the new millennium have seen a new wave of mobilization of the social centres at local, national and international levels. On the one hand, since the explosion of the Global Justice Movement from 1999 onwards, most Italian squats activists participated to the anti-liberalist demonstrations in Italy and abroad, above all in protest against the G8 summit in Genoa in July 2001; following that event the White Overalls were dissolved and set up a new political movement, the *Disobedients,* with other networks,[9] while in March of the same year the *Network for Global Rights* have been set up by dissentient social centres of *Autonomia* with the radical union Cobas.

On the other hand, the social centres activists have been protagonists, together with other collective actors as citizens' committees (della Porta 2004), in the main LULUs conflicts in Italy, like the protest campaigns against the TAV (*Treni Alta Velocità* – High Speed Trains) in Val di Susa (Northern Italy) and against the building of the Bridge on the Messina Straits (between Sicily and Calabria), giving a remarkable contribution in shifting these territorial conflicts in global ones (della Porta and Piazza 2007). On February 2007, social centres have supported Dal Molin citizens' committees in the protest campaign against the enlargement of the US military base in Vicenza (North-Eastern Italy). Just in this period, the main social centre of the revolutionary communist area – *Gramigna* in Padua – has been under attack by police and the media, because some its activists were arrested and accused of being part of an armed group and, in July 2007, it was evacuated by police; no solidarity was expressed by the social centres belonging to the other networks.

In the last years, social centres militants have played a remarkable role in other movements and mobilizations, like the students' protest against governmental Education policy and university reform in 2008 and 2010.

4. Squatting in Catania

Catania is the second greatest city of Sicily with a population of 340,000 inhabitants. Its economy is mainly based on trade and services with a few

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[9] Naples' No Global Network, Rome's Rage Network and Young Communists (youth section of PRC).

industries, the most important ones are specialized in high technology. Unemployment, under-employment and the presence of organized crime are usually considered its main social problems. As far as local politics is concerned, Catania had been always governed by moderate municipal administrations led by Christian Democrats until 1992; from 1993 to 1999 a centre-left coalition had ruled the city, but from 2000 to the present, centre-right administrations led by Forza Italia have governed the Municipality.

The first squatting took place in Catania in June 1988, when the Committee for Self-Managed Social Spaces – set up during the previous year by two groups of activists, one belonging to the Autonomous area and the other to the Anarchist one - occupied the social centre *Experia*. It is located in one of the oldest lower-class neighbourhoods of Catania, in an former cinema within an ancient building owned by the Sicilian Region. It was the first occupation of a social centre in Sicily and probably one of the older in all the Southern Italy. After abandoning the centre only two months later because of some arsonist attacks of Mafia origin, the activists of the Autonomous area, together with a group of students, squatted a new social centre, *Guernica*, in another area of the town (the middle-class district) in March 1989. Along the following three years, *Guernica* began the reference point for hundreds of youths of all the city, thanks to the capacity of its activists to create social aggregation[10] and mobilization, engaged either in political campaigns (against the 1st war in Iraq and drugs addiction, supporting the fight of the Palestinian people, the house squatters and the student movement "the panther", etc.), or in countercultural activities (counter-information, concerts, theatrical and musical laboratories, etc.). In autumn 1991, an internal split occurred because of the adhesion of some militants to the "revolutionary communist" area, harshly criticized by the other activists of the *Autonomia*,[11] who, after have exited from *Guernica*, occupied a new squat, the *Auro*, together with a another group of students. In February 1992 police evicted simultaneously both *Guernica* and *Auro*, without active resistance by occupants. After a brief occupation of a private

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[10] I mean with this expression, from now onwards, the capacity to attract people from outside in order to create "sociality", that is according to Pizzorno: "the formation of a relationship between two or more persons… that, thanks to the relation in which they recognize each other a certain identity, they exit from the state of *loneliness* or *isolation*" (2007a: 17-18).

[11] Till that moment, different political and ideological leanings were coexisted within *Guernica*, without the social centre on the whole taking side with a precise national network. Besides, it is necessary to precise that the "revolutionary communist" area was born in the 1980s as a consequence of an internal fracture of the area of *Autonomia*.

building in the spring of the same year, the activists of *Guernica* re-occupied *Experia* for the second time in May 1992. The following year, a new internal political split, about the organisational structure and political strategy of the social centre, entailed the exit of the "historical core" of the squatters; some of these occupied for a short period a new social centre, the *Vulcano*, in the same neighbourhood, others gave up political militancy.

4.1. The Squatted People's Centre (Centro Popolare Occupato) 'Experia'

Experia – since 1993 onwards – was characterized immediately for the exclusive political identity of the occupying group, based on a radical version of Marxist ideology, with a strong sense of belonging to the social centre, entailing as a consequence the choice for radical political activities and campaigns, on the one hand, and for the orientation toward inhabitants of the neighbourhood within which it is located, on the other hand. The Experia activists, in fact, define themselves "revolutionary communists" to stress the difference with communists belonging to the institutional left, refusing conventional politics and relationships with institutions and representative democracy, and identifying the "proletarian referent" (people they address their political contents) in subaltern classes living in 'popular' districts of the town, as *Antico Corso* where the social centre is located. The political choice to address their own activities and their capacity of social aggregation, not to the town as a whole or to the citizens in general, but just to the lowest social classes of 'popular' neighbourhoods, and the affiliation with a national political area (the "revolutionary communist"), was confirmed in 1998 by the change of denomination from CSOA to CPO (Occupied People's Centre). Nonetheless, in the 1990s the activities of *Experia* were focused almost solely upon political and counter-information campaigns, e.g. anti-fascist, anti-imperialist, solidarity with liberation fights of people from the South of world, because they were unable to involve the "proletarian referent" of the lower classes districts. Moreover, Experia maintained a closedness attitude toward other local SMOs considered too moderate and "reformist".

In the summer of 2000, CPO Experia, together with the citizens' spontaneous committee "*Antico Corso*" – set up mainly with the contribution of *Experia* (Piazza 2004a; 2004b) – promoted a campaign against the threat of eviction by the local Authorities and against the construction of an university building in the yard at the back of the centre, where outside activities were carried out. It was a turning point: a new generation of young activ-

ists, especially high school and university students, adhered to *Experia*, which also obtained the support of the neighbourhood people and of the other local movement organizations (I1; I5). Moreover, between the end of 2000 and the summer of 2001, the Experia activists participated in the initiatives and demonstrations of the rising GJM in Italy: in December 2001 during the UN counter-summit on organized crime in Palermo, and in July 2001 during the G8 counter-summit. They were also very active during the local demonstrations post-Genoa against state repression, and the first local assemblies were held in the social centre, but they did not adhere to the rising Catania Social Forum.

Meanwhile, the Experia activists had occupied another place in the same district setting up the *"Idria"* CIP (Centre for the People's Initiative), taking its name from the street where it was located, in order to promote people's self-organization in the neighbourhood. In the following period, nonetheless, after transferring all the energies from *Experia* to *Idria*, the original enthusiasm ran out, in part due to the difficulties in the relationship with the neighbourhood inhabitants, thus the experience of CIP came to a halt. The activities were focused only upon the general political issues. In 2003, after an internal debate, the Experia militants decided to diversify their tasks, to leave the management of the social centre to the younger activists in order to raise social and youth aggregation, while the oldest activists founded a documentation centre and a political propaganda journal, "*Without Bosses*". There was a shifting of phase characterized by the openness of the social centre toward new groups and social actors, according to the words of a young activist: "At this point, there was a phase where aggregation activity of Experia was eliminated almost totally; the *Idria* was finished and everybody is concentrated on general political issues (e.g. Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq). In the meantime, a collective debate arouse within us, so that we said: 'let's try to increase our instruments (before this moment everything was made within the CPO assembly), we give the management of the social centre to the youngest, and create other two instruments, that is the documentation centre and the journal 'Without Bosses'. The Documentation centre never took off and the journal had an inconstant run. Thus we returned to CPO, lightened of many general political responsibilities, and we began again with aggregation. The youngest comrades have had a very strong role in re-opening Experia to aggregation and, from this point of view, we opened in a planned way to other social subjects that didn't frequent Experia since many years. Bear in mind that there had been no new activists for many years, from 2000 to 2003-04. It was a thorny problem

and we tried to correct it. So we invented the Festival of the grass-roots groups, we gathered students, we were very present in the schools and slowly, through a patient labour, new activists came in" (I1).

As a consequence of the generational turnover, the activities of Experia aimed to social and political aggregation were re-launched, new young activists (high school students) joined the social centre which opened to the other SMOs. "No aggregation, not struggle. No struggle, no rights" has been the slogan which has characterized the most recent phase of Experia. This conception of what a social centre would have to be emerges with clearness from the words of the interviewees: "The first word I have always written, read and felt in these years, whenever I think about Experia, it is 'aggregation', social but also political. It arises as social aggregation, as a meeting place inside a town that, yes, in the last few years has lived some transformations - the people of all the ages meet again in the roads, in the pubs – but people live forms of disaggregation, of alienation, of individualism, live their problems in a personal way, individually. The attempt instead was that of creating a place where, through a concert, sociality and debates, the problems which are individually lived – being also social ones – can be discussed collectively; so we can try to find collective solutions, collective answers thorough social mobilization, that is many people who live the same situation and try to give answers and solutions together" (I3). "For me a social centre is above all a place of 'aggregation'. I have also been in other social centres, but our characteristic is the aggregation; when you come in the social centre, you feel part of a place, of an objective, of a campaign, of a community of comrades; you do not feel disaggregated, isolated. It is the difference between 'place' and 'non-place': a place where you feel actively part of something… there are few social centres which also give you a sense of identification with a place like ours. I think that is what we have been able to give" (I5). Here the strong feeling of belonging and identification with the social centre emerges corresponding to the value of 'collectivity' (community) shared by all activists.

The social centre transformed in a closed community, in a "happy island" separated from the rest of the city, is anyway a present risk among the young activists, who ask themselves: "social centre or happy island? Do we need to make the social centre a place where we feel happy, because it is a cost-free venue, or a place open to the city where needs and social problems can be collectively and publicly debated?" (I3). The answer is that "the initial input was to find a social aggregation venue, and then to add political aggregation, where problems are discussed and political an-

swers are tried to be given" (I3). It means, according to another interviewee, "the social centre must be a 'laboratory of resistance' within society; a laboratory because it takes from the society and then intervenes within it; in my opinion, social centre remains only a point of departure and not of arrival, that is the social centre can be a place where one reunites, but not the tool with which one fights. So that, as the years go by, every time we have been able to intervene on concrete, political and social problems, other organisations, other tools were generated by ourselves (citizens' committees, student collectives, etc.)" (I1). Therefore the social centre is conceived by their activists not as the end, but as a stage of a broader path inserted in a not well-defined 'revolutionary' strategy. Notwithstanding, the defence and strengthening of the political identity of the squatting group, than the defence of the centre as a physical place, has become an end *in se*.

Meanwhile, the political campaigns characterising Experia have gone on during these last years: the Antifascist campaigns for the April 25th (anniversary of the Italian Liberation from the Fascist regime) and those against *Forza Nuova* (New Force), a radical right-wing group; the internationalist campaigns, above all those supporting Palestinian struggle and the antimperialist ones against the wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq. The outside openness of Experia towards other local SMOs, as the result of the changed phase, is moreover underlined: "the change of the phase is not only related to the physical opening of the centre, but also to the openness towards the other groups, a 360° openness toward everyone; since most of us were university and high school students, we were able to keep in touch with other students and to open ourselves to many experiences. This did not happen before, when we organised initiatives on our own and the centre was open once or twice a week. Instead today it is different, there are other groups which propose us activities and initiatives on some issues, and so we discuss the proposal and, if we accept it, we do it together with them. This open attitude has regarded artistic, social and political groups" (I5).

On the Autumn of 2006, nevertheless, the openness phase towards other local SMOs seemed to have come to an end, following some hard political disputes with some of these, and the social centre has encountered a period of crisis mainly due to less attendance and engagement of some activists. After this period of crisis (2007), in 2008 the *Experia* militants aggregated new groups and carried out new activities within the centre (cycle and juggler workshops, 'popular gym', *capoeira* dance), whereas the student activists were involved in the university movement. On 30 October 2009, the Social Centre was brutally evicted by police, receiving the solidarity of lo-

cal residents and of associations, unions and left parties of the city. On the Spring of 2011, activists of Experia occupied other vacant premises, a former communal gym in the same area of the city.

4.1.1. Organizational structure and internal decision-making.

The organizational structure of Experia is informal, participative, horizontal and non-hierarchical and no internal leading group separated from the entire membership exists. It is mainly based on the 'management assembly' or 'management committee', which meets weekly on Monday evenings.

The assemblies are generally public and open to everyone (I5), even to outsiders, individual or collective actors *(inclusiveness)*, with the exclusion of fascists and policemen alone (I1). Nevertheless, some meetings with "different composition" (I1) can be held, where some (generally external individuals or groups) participate only in the debates on the issues they are interested and then, when other issues are discussed, they spontaneously go out; besides, some 'closed-doors meetings' can be held, that is without the presence of outsiders, when concerns defined 'ticklish' are dealt with: "there are things which are debated and decided behind closed doors" (I3); "we can decide to hold closed-doors meetings when there are ticklish issues to be faced" (I1). Then, there are two types of decision making setting: one more inclusive where all people with an interest in the issues discussed (even the outsiders) can participate; another one more exclusive, reserved only to the "hard core" of the occupants.

Usually fifteen-twenty persons participate to the meetings: the "hard core" of the activists and some sympathizer and casual attendant. One of the participants (not always the same activist) has the task to set the agenda where the various political, social, technical and organizational issues are inserted to be discussed; an interviewee underlines that "everyone is able to set the agenda and every Monday we all know very well about what we have to discuss. If someone is absent, the management committee doesn't collapse. There is an inter-exchange of the roles" (I5). Generally, first technical and organizational issues are faced (cleaning, organizing concerts, the bar, etc.), then the political ones (promoting initiatives, participating in assemblies and demonstrations, etc.). Almost all participants speak and intervene in the discussion, someone more than others. People who participates

for the first time usually listens the other and then makes his proposal, which is then collectively discussed *(equality)*.

All participants are put in condition to express their opinion and take position through the availability of all informational elements on the issues debated, as an activist states: "when some arguments or projects initiatives are inserted during the meetings by one or two people, they provide the other participants all the notions necessary to have an idea and to take a decision on these issues. Given that the initiatives decided must involve everyone, they must be shared by all members, because everyone must know what they will do; so everyone must know what has been discussed during the meetings. It's a positive thing." (I3

The interviewees recognize that "there is a different weighting of participants" (I5), that is some militants, the ones with more experience and discursive resources, count and weight more than others in the decisional process (I1; I3; I5); notwithstanding, even the youngest activists (the newcomers)[12] can affect decision-making if they are able to insert themselves into the discussion and to give a qualitative contribution: "Clearly, people with less experience intervene in two ways: one is when people who doesn't yet know the political debate and the 'unwritten rules' which run the management of our place; these people have few possibilities to actually affect the decision-making. Another way concerns those who are able to take part in the discussions and enrich it; in this case they can push the others to change idea and innovate the framework of the discussion qualitatively – it happened rarely, but it happened" (I1). Therefore, a more equal redistribution of weighting of militants is stressed, and above all the fact that every activist is now able to perform different tasks without depending on someone in particular (a leader or the senior militants).

Discussion occurs generally very fluidly, in a relaxed atmosphere, a strong sense of group solidarity is perceived. Some tensions, rarely very hard, can arise on political issues; internal disputes and divergences seem to arise around different ways of conceiving what is the common good of the community, and not to come from the attempts to pursue self-interests or the interest of internal groups (they do not exist); moreover, conflicts for

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[12] It is necessary to precise that, in this case, the distinction between the youngest (mainly high school students) and the oldest activists (mainly university students) is referred to the 'management committee' alone, and not to the 'political' meetings in which also senior militants – not belonging to the committee – participate (see below).

leadership or 'personalisms' did not emerge during the research *(common good)*.

All decisions are taken during the assemblies open to the public *(transparency)* (I5). Nevertheless, it can occur that some arguments are previously and separately discussed by some activists – a little informal group – in order to put them into the decisional agenda, although no decision is taken before the meeting: "there are some issues we discuss before in three or four, because if next Monday there will be an important debate, we talk about it beforehand. We don't go to the assembly with a decision already taken on that issue, but we only decide that it must be collectively debated" (I5); "actually all decisions are taken during the assembly" (I1).

During these meetings, all the decisions are taken by all participants, and are binding for all members, exclusively by the adoption of the *consensual method,* that is through the discussion and the pursuit of unanimity, without any voting, as it is clearly stated by the interviewed activists: "Everything is decided during the management committee through debate. Someone proposes an initiative or a campaign; the proposals, which can come internally from a comrade or externally from other groups or individuals, are discussed within the management committee and, if they are interesting and congruent with our goals, we decide on them" (I5); "Decision are taken unanimously through consensual method" (I1); " If someone doesn't agree, we try to discuss it until the end" (I3); "There are no voting mechanisms" (I5); "The issues faced sometimes are long currents of debate which we open, we temporary abandon and which emerge again during the years" (I1).

When some divergence arises, participants try to convince the others by their argumentations. The internal clashes and disputes are faced trough the debate and very long discussions and resolved only with the achievement of unanimity;[13] in the case in which a shared solution is not found, the discussion is postponed with the result of a 'decisional stalemate': "the discussion is not set aside but postponed, even if this implies to paralyse the activity; so we have to talk again if we all do not agree. It's happened before and it happens now" (I1).

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[13] For example, in the case in which the issue regarded if the solidarity to Auro should be or not be publicly expressed (see next paragraph), the initial divergences were overcome by convincing the internal opponents that to show solidarity to another social centre under threat of evacuation, was the right choice, notwithstanding the lack of direct relations with Auro.

Therefore, when decisions are taken, *preferences transformation* occurs, also on the basis of new elements (information, data) emerging in the course of the debate: "the mechanism of the transformation of the initial preferences exists and has existed in almost every meeting and among almost all the comrades. It also depends on the new information, a new element which I've never thought about… Personally, there have been times when I thought that my position, on the basis of the others' opinions, was wrong, and times when I was right notwithstanding the others' positions" (I1). When the preferences transformation does not happen, no decision is taken, but they are never aggregated by voting or strategic negotiation, because internal cohesion is a value and a trait of Experia collective identity.

Rational argumentations are often used during discussion in order to convince others participants and transform their preferences, but always within the shared collective identity. In the activists' perception there is a balance between the defence of their collective identity and the effectiveness of decisions to be taken, between ideology and pragmatism: "in my opinion there is a mutual balance between the two things; that is, for example, some decisions are not taken just because the rationality pushed us not take them, although our identity would require that. It's happened a lot of times over all these years" (I1); "we never totally sacrifice our identity for the sake of the reason, but we graduate it on the basis of the rationality. We are very pragmatic and often rationality prevails on identity" (I1). Nevertheless, there is not a real dilemma between identity and rationality, because for activist the former is synonymous of ideology and the latter has the instrumental common meaning of the 'better or more effective mean of pursuing and end'; but if we consider that behind even this kind of rationality there is always the "common need to assure recognition to the identity" (Pizzorno 2007a: 62; 1986) of the group by themselves and by others, their choices will be simultaneously rational and aimed at defending collective identity. In fact, when an activist proudly states that "we've never done things which could harm our identity, our ideological positions, just to reach a better effect, and we have preferred not to have relationships with other groups rather than to make something to detriment of our ideological identity" (I5), it means that identity, "in order to keep itself, must aim at coherence of the choices during the time" (Pizzorno 2007a: 27).

There are no internal groups autonomously managing the spaces of the social centre. Nevertheless, as regards political issues, the Experia activists sometimes discuss them with the militants of the documentation centre and the journal, with which they share political-ideological belonging, but

anymore the management of the social centre from which they come: "As far as managing the place is concerned, there is only the 'management assembly' and that's where we decide what to do. Then there are other meetings dealing with to the relationship between us and the other comrades who manage the journal and documentation centre. There is no a fixed date, unlike the management committee, but they [these type of meetings] arise from the need to discuss some issues and then the meetings are held, sometimes overlapping those of the management committee" (I3). It is during this type of meetings that tensions and disputes can arise between the young activists of the social centre and those who were the first, but now former, occupants of the Experia. The generational clash seems to be based more on the tactics and forms of communication than on the political contents, between the more pragmatic young activists and the more ideological old militants. Usually a common solution is found by consensual method or, more rarely, by a compromise between the autonomy of the occupants and the political weight of the senior militants. Anyway, these choices never regard the internal management policies of the social centre.

In conclusion, the internal decision-making of Experia seems therefore much closer to the deliberative democracy model than to the others, as can be noticed by the presence of its characteristics: the exclusive adoption of the consensual method to take decisions and to solve internal divergences, and the preferences transformation which occurs during the debate when a decision is taken. When unanimity is not reached, activists never vote or negotiate, no decision is taken and issues under discussion are momentarily suspended to be afterwards faced. Notwithstanding, if a unanimity decision is impossible to take on choices which activists consider fundamental, that can entails an internal rift and the exit of dissentient militants from the group; it did not happen recently, but occurred during the experience of Guernica social centre and the first year of the second occupation of Experia, as mentioned before.

Then, the Experia activists practice internally deliberative democracy, but it is necessary to specify that they define "assembleary" their decisional method, because for them this term means that all decisions are taken during the assembly; "deliberative" means "decisional" (this is the common meaning in Italian language) and their practice is not defined as a different type of democracy; in their perception the term "democracy" means only "representative-democratic regime", which they identify as the target, the state and the institutions, the enemy, of which they refuse the legitimacy.

4.1.2. Relationships with movements and other SMOs

As regards the relations with the other SMOs at extra-local level, as before mentioned, the Experia activists identify themselves in a national area they define "revolutionary communist" and which some social centres in Padua, Florence and Milan belong to. Nevertheless, a stable national coordination among these social centres, which periodically meet, does not exist, and Experia has only direct relationships with them, almost exclusively participating in common sectors to the national demonstrations. At regional level, linkages with other groups are even looser, regarding a few groups and social centres in Palermo. During the last years Experia only once made part of a regional coordination, a structure created *ad hoc* in solidarity with the fight of FIAT industrial workers of Termini Imerese (near Palermo).

As far as the relationships at local level are concerned, after a closedness period during the 1990s, Experia opened to relations with the other urban SMOs, also because of the change of phase and of the generational turnover. Not with everyone, but with someone alone. First of all, the most stable and long lasting relations are those with a small local Leninist group, the *Circolo Lenin (*Lenin Club), considered the ideological closest one and with which Experia has organized the campaigns that marked the divergences with the other groups. An interviewed activist underlines the collaboration with this group, but also the differences: "The cooperation with the Lenin Club is due to their being the sole revolutionary communist organization present in Catania since a long time. On issues as wars, 'International Revolutionary Prisoner Day', the April 25th and others, we have often acted with them, notwithstanding a few differences: in Maoist terms, it could be said that they have always been a local group focused on theoretical elaboration and propaganda (theory), while we are characterized by the tendency to the social intervention (practice)" (I1)

The other SMOs with which Experia has had relations, even if considered politically far, are: a non-profit organization well rooted in another lower class quarter, *Iqbal Masih*, and a local group engaged on gender issues, *Open Mind*, "which didn't have venues, aggregation places where to do initiatives, so they decided to do them at the social centre. So there has been, firstly, our openness for the aggregative and leisure activities, then we promoted together political campaigns, always with a lot of difficulties, because we are politically different" (I5); the local branch of Attac and Cobas with which Experia has organized the anti-imperialist and antimilitarist

campaigns against the wars and the US military base of Sigonella (close to Catania); the provincial branch of the Young Communists, but not with the PRC, for the shared positions on 'imperialist wars'; the university and high school collectives; a group of anarchists, for a short period, only for solidarity initiatives pro demonstrators arrested in Genoa during the counter-summit. No direct relationship has instead kept with the other urban social centre, Auro, because Experia militants do not consider it as a political actor; they only expressed a 'suffered' solidarity when it was under threat of evacuation: "We do not have relations with Auro because it is a social centre that doesn't express political positions" (I5); "with Auro, zero relationships, the only one was when it seemed under threat of evacuation; we decide to support it, but with many internal oppositions" (I1). Also recently, in July 2007, after some simultaneous arsonist attacks at the gates of Auro and Experia, the activists of both social centres expressed mutual solidarity, but did not organize joint initiatives against neo-fascists, considered the responsible for the attacks.

Therefore, Experia activists select their relationship with other local groups and organizations on the basis of criteria of ideological affinity (Lenin Club), on the one hand, and for tactical reasons, on the other: they prefer groups which share political positions on certain issues (Young Communists, Attac and Cobas on anti-war campaigns) or have a social rootedness in lower class district (Iqbal Masih), as an activist states: "in my opinion, the relations with structures which have a social rootedness, as Iqbal Masih, are more productive and hopeful than those with groups that don't have it" (I1). Moreover, also the general political evaluation on SMOs attitudes towards national government is determinant to open or close relationship, as in the recent phase of closedness towards almost all local groups, accused not to criticize enough centre-left Italian government policies: "we make another political evaluation: in this period it is very difficult to have relations with these structures, because they keep an high level of uncritical support toward Prodi government policies (see the military intervention in Lebanon, financial policy, etc.)" (I1).

Together with the other SMOs, Experia organized anti-war and antifascist campaigns, participated to various local coordinations, but not to the Catania Social Forum, because social centre activists did not agree with its political positions, considered too moderate, and its analysis made about the events of Genoa, postulating a distinction between "the goods" (pacifists and non-violent) and "the bad" (the "black blocks", the violent) demonstrators (I1; I5).

Among the experiences of participation in broader movement structures, the one considered the most important by the same activists, was the adhesion to the city Antifascist Committee, which promoted the *16/9* campaign, due to the date of a big anti-fascist demonstration in Catania. Differently from the other coordinations – inter-groups structures set up *ad hoc* on single-issue through the adhesion of the SMOs as collective actors which maintained their separated identity, according to the assembleary model – the Antifascist Committee foresaw the adhesion of individuals alone, not of the groups, and the adoption of consensual method in its internal decision-making. The Experia militants first were among the main protagonists, then they abandoned the Committee when they perceived its transformation in an another inter-groups, as the interviewees remember: "the 16/9 antifascist campaign was a totally shared initiative, where we renounced to our symbol; we did everything together" (I5); "the Antifascist Committee had the peculiarity not to be a coordination, but a committee: people joined it individually not as groups. Then, in practice, after one year, it was transformed in an inter-groups and it was not able to be aggregative for individuals anymore; so we decided to leave it, because it was less and less interesting for us" (I1). But, that was not the only reason why the Experia activists exited from Antifascist Committee, because they broke with other groups above all on the 'square management', that is the different and incompatible way to demonstrate during the 16/9 march; in fact, they were harshly criticized by other SMOs, because they have prepared a 'marshal body' in order to face, if necessary, possible fascist aggression, notwithstanding no clash happened. The criticism was clearly refused, because it damaged their autonomy in the choice of the repertoires of action, as the interviewees remember: "we thought that, in case of any fascist provocation during the procession, we would have practiced not only self-defence, but also the offence" (I1); "and we were organized to do it, but fortunately it wasn't necessary. Moreover, during the meeting with the other structures after the march, Experia comrades were 'tried' for that and, because we don't have to give an account to the others of our way of demonstrating, we decided to interrupt relationship with them" (I5). Even in this case, choices made by Experia militants (different way of demonstrating, breaking of relations) were coherent (rational) with the aim of defending identity and assuring recognition of it by themselves and, above all, by other groups.

The participation of Experia to various urban movements and initiatives is always discussed and decided within the management assembly, so how the choice of activists who take part to the meetings of the coordinations –

generally on the basis of their availability, because there are not fixed delegates. They are rigidly bound to the imperative mandate (mandated delegation), they report the decisions taken within the management committee, do not have decisional autonomy during the coordination meetings and must come back to discuss with other Experia activists the eventual changes, as the interviewees unanimously assert: "Usually we decide during the assembly who will go to the movement meetings: who is free, he goes. Who is charged with the participation to the movement meetings usually reports the decisions within the group and then they are debated again. Anyway, no one takes the responsibility to say something we have not discussed before" (I5); "he is always delegated and bound to a collective choice, to what has been collectively discussed and decided. There is a very strong imperative mandate" (I1).

During the movement meetings, the Experia activists tend to defend rigidly their political choices and positions, which they can modify marginally alone mediating with other positions expressed by other groups; this occurs usually during the writing of joined documents and leaflets, as this activist describes: "It usually works in this way: we discuss separately during our meeting about the issue which will be dealt with the others; we take our collective decision and then we express and compare it with the other positions during the joined meetings. Usually, we are very rigid on our position. If it is necessary to write a text, someone is entrusted to do it and then to take back it in the following meeting; so the text will be approved or eventually corrected and modified, also through email. In some campaigns we have always proposed the base text. The degree of modification we accept is very low" (I1). During the bargaining with the other SMOs, sometimes the Experia activists try to find a position shared by everyone: "recently I tried to find a denominator common minimum" (I1); "sometimes, in order to satisfy everyone, there are references to every group in the joined leaflets" (I5). Nevertheless, when they think the mediation and the agreement is not possible, they can decide to exit from the coordination, as it often occurred, or not to adhere to the joined initiative and to demonstrate autonomously and separately: "sometimes it happened that we have exited to maintain our identity and the hard core, that is we have participated to the same initiative, but with a separate and different leaflet" (I1).

The decisional method is described by the Experia militants as "assembleary and consensual; usually there is no voting" (I1), that is decisions taken in assembly need consensus of all participants groups. It does not mean that the process follows the deliberative model, because activists

categories do not coincide with those used in this paper for the analysis, as said before, but in that case the Deliberative-Assembleary one (only when preferences are not transformed, they are aggregated by voting or negotiation). Nevertheless, because in this case the unit of analysis is the way of relating with other SMOs by social centre activists within local movement arenas, and not the whole decision-making of these settings, it can be defined as following the Assembleary Model: in fact, the squat militants never transform their preferences during this type of movement meetings, on the contrary they try to transform the preferences of other participants and to aggregate them to their own; they always strategically negotiate their political positions with those differently expressed by other groups to find a shared solution, and when an agreement or a compromise is not reached, Experia activists do not accept the decisions of majority, but exit from the arena.

Only during the initial participation to the Antifascist Committee Experia occupants seem to have followed the Deliberative model (consensual method and unanimity decision), because they shared aims and practices of that structure; nevertheless, not only it was a brief exception to the rule, but even they collectively exited from the committee when did not share its transformation anymore, thus acting again as a unitary actor according the Assembleary model.

4.2. The Self-Managed Social Centre (Centro Sociale Autogestito) 'Auro'

The Social Centre "Auro", is situated in the heart of the historical centre of Catania, within a former nunnery, currently property of the municipality, that was for thirty years the residence of the editorial office and the print shop of a local newspaper. As mentioned before, Auro was squatted in the autumn of 1991 by a group of activists coming from the social centre Guernica, exited subsequently a political fracture, and by other people, mainly young students.

Here is the identity and the aims of the promoter group, according to the statement of one of the earlier squatters, still now activist: "the group who occupied Auro was in part linked to the area of *Autonomia Operaia*, then there were many individual militants, people set outside political groups, aggregated to this specific project, primarily based upon the idea of taking a place in the town, setting it free and using it in order to make various kind of activities concerning people belonging to the project, e.g. political activi-

ties, collectives, groups working on NGOs and within voluntary and no-profit associations, like so groups with artistic and cultural aims" (I2). Evacuated by police on February 1992, Auro was re-occupied after a few time by the same activists, who restarted especially cultural and artistic activities and counter-information ones.

As a matter of fact, differently from Experia, the main traits maintained until now by Auro were the preference for (counter)cultural activities and other activities linked to the counter-information, on the one hand, and a range of action not limited to a narrow area but extended to the town, especially to young circles, on the other hand. As regards artistic and cultural activities, in addition to countless weekly concerts, there were many groups enlivening collectives and experimental workshops: a soundproof and computerized recording room, a multi-ethnic game room, as a space of meeting for the sons of the migrants, a workshop of literary self-production, a workshop of video-cinematic experimentation and production with a little cinema, a show-room for artists, a workshop of chess and a game room for adults, and other activities. As far as the initiatives about counter-information are concerned, in addition to the initial hospitality to the editorial staff of the anti-mafia magazine "*I Siciliani*", since 1994 a group of activists created an alternative computer network and in 1998 founded a workshop for the experimentation of new computer technologies of communication, the *FreakNet MediaLab*, with a network of computers usable by everyone and based on Linux System; nonetheless, subsequently to internal contrasts, the workshop was closed after a few years.

In 1998, as a consequence of a threat of evacuation and a following negotiation with the centre-left communal administration, the building was officially assigned at no cost to the occupants by the municipality (*use commodatum*), although the squatters did not sign the agreement because, according to an activist, "it carried restrictions that would have allowed to kick we out any moment" (I2). The 'legalization' of Auro and its transition from an occupied and self-managed social centre (CSOA) to the current denomination 'self-managed social centre' (CSA) happened subsequently to an internal debate between supporters and opponents that, as an activist reminds, has reappeared at times also during the later period: "in 1998 there was a turning point, marked by first concession by the side of municipality, a very important step that, depending on the point of view, can be considered as an institutional recognition or as a sort of betrayal, because the passage is from an occupied to a self-managed social centre, and the difference, although minimal, exists and it depends on the new relations with in-

stitutions. The recognition is an advantage, on the one hand, because it means that you obtain something, but it is a compromise, on the other hand. When in 1998 there was the concession by the municipality, there was also a division within the social centre, because a group didn't agree. This problem is always open and we discuss about it still now: there is an area hostile with respect to institutions and someone else who, on the contrary, tries to safeguard the place and to maintain closer this relation" (I4).

Coupled with cultural and informative activities, also the political one were carried out during the 1990s, through the organization of many initiatives, especially assemblies and debates about various issues: initiatives against wars, initiatives of solidarity with the struggle of Palestinian people, initiatives about immigration, about precarious work, anti-prohibitionist initiatives about drug addictions and for the liberalization of the marijuana.

In 2001 the Auro activists participated to the mobilizations against G8 in Genoa, to the following demonstrations of the global movement and some of them even to the brief life of the Catania Social Forum; they participated just individually and never as social centre as a whole, because the main feature of Auro, delineated during the years, is the lack of a political-ideological identity shared by all members, as in the words of an activist: "on the contrary of the great majority of other social centres, Auro lacks of one political collective, this is a hard matter of fact that has to be admitted. Auro has a management assembly that doesn't coincide with a political collective, and this is a paradox, because you share a space with many people politically similar and there is a common identity - about anti-fascism, anti-liberism, about wars, discriminations, and so on - but the problem is that you can't act together with them, there isn't a unified political message. We co-operate somehow, in cultural self-production or during a concert, but we have not a political collective and we never discuss general political issues" (I4). It does not mean that Auro is lacking of a collective identity or that it is weak, as it is perceived by their members, but that it is an inclusive identity which encompass different political-ideological leanings, even if they are not shared by all activists.

In fact, the lack of a shared ideological identity is the reason why Auro is not affiliated to any social centre network or national political area; this condition is perceived by an interviewee as a problem, on the one hand, but it is also claimed proudly as a specificity of Auro collective identity, although he states the lack of it: "We don't have a national area as a reference, simply because every activist has his own area. The problem is that

there isn't a common identity, although it's not a real problem, except in the perception of the outsiders, but in my opinion it's not a defect but a different way of being" (I4).

During the years from 2005 to 2007, Auro, besides cultural activities, mobilized within two political campaigns, together with other local SMOs: about anti-fascism, called *16/9* campaign, against the violence by the side of the radical right group *Forza Nuova*; against the sale of the municipal real estate heritage through a society called "*Catania Risorse*" (Catania Resources), constituted by the Commune with the intent to restore budget debts; a campaign strongly felt by Auro, because the project of sale probably includes also the building where Auro is situated, entailing thus a threat of evacuation.

4.2.1. Organizational structure and internal decision-making

The organizational structure of Auro is horizontal, non-hierarchical but fragmented, because it is formed by 'the management assembly' and various internal groups and collectives that manage autonomously their owns spaces within the social centre, being obliged to respect just the general rules of the centre.

It is described by an activist as a "container" whose "mechanism is very simple: Auro can be viewed as a container, within which there is the management assembly that decides the rules and main managing dynamics, that is the immediate activities, as like cleaning, shopping for the bar, and so on. Other internal spaces are subdivided and organized autonomously. Every collective, every group working within Auro has an unquestioning autonomy in its choices, except that, obviously, the obligation to respect the general rules of the centre; therefore, there is a minimal coordination within the structure but no political interference in the choices of the groups. Anyway there are also things made by all the groups together to support Auro as a whole" (I2). The idea of a "container" is confirmed by another activist, who defines this kind of structure as a set of "microcosms", stressing the strong internal fragmentation, the lack of cohesion, the difficulty to reach unitary positions, but also claiming the autonomy of the groups: "Auro is a container, a set of microcosms, also because every individual is a microcosm. Several groups participate to the management assembly. Currently, Auro lacks of cohesion and people working within it are in very small groups, set up by 3-6 people (6 is a big group!) or even by individual bringing their

ideas. The point is to be able to elaborate a line, that is coming to an agreement between individual ideas. There are two groups making cinema, video-production and visual arts, a variety of groups making dance, and also jugglers, actors, people dealing with art or music; everyone acts as an individual, there aren't political collectives; everyone is autonomous and this is a specificity of this place. The management assembly doesn't make 'iron rules', so that who transgresses them is not a deviant to be punished; everyone has the possibility to manage his own slice of place as he wants. Of course, there are a few cohabitation rules assuring a pacific management of the place" (I4). Also here what is perceived as a problem (lack of internal cohesion), it is also claimed as a peculiarity of Auro collective identity (autonomy of individuals and groups in managing internal spaces).

The management assembly of Auro is an open and weekly meeting in which, every Monday evening, issues regarding the centre as a whole are faced and decisions are taken, as an interviewed activist explains: "The decision-making setting is the management assembly: anyone, also an outsider, can make a proposal, and every suggestion will be discussed in its internal articulation, or collectively elaborated; if it is just an idea, we try to decline all its points and convert it in action" (I4).

The meetings are public and open to participation of every member and even of outsiders, with the only exclusion of the anti-fascism, as an interviewee states: "There aren't discriminating factors, normally we hold open door assemblies, though, surely, it is off-limits to certain people (no skin heads, fascists); but Auro, compared to other places in Catania, is actually an open place, because also the newcomers can propose their ideas" (I4). *(inclusiveness)*

Nonetheless, not every occupant of Auro always participates to the management assembly, because some members of the internal groups participate almost always, the other ones only when issues related to their group are dealt with. Usually a few people participate, from less than ten to a dozen, mainly youths, students and one o two senior activists (the first occupants remained); whereas one of oldest participates only sometimes, the other one is almost always present and has the task to set the agenda and to list the issue to be faced: they concern especially technical and organizational problems (division of tasks: cleaning, bar opening, etc.) and sometimes cultural and political initiatives (organizing concerts, public debates, presentation of books, etc.). The senior activist introduces the discussion and then the other people speak and intervene in the debate.

The interviewees recognize that activists with more experience and showing more engagement matter more than the others, as this young member affirms: "In theory, nobody has more weight, but individual abilities are acknowledged, there is a sort of 'meritocracy'; so I will admit more importance to people who, like me, spend more energies; moreover, obviously, a senior activist can manage the assembly very well, while I can't because I'm still young. In addition to engagement, experience is very important while, on the contrary, we recognize just a low weight to the discursive resources, because contents are more important than words used" (I4) *(equality)*

The discussion generally occurs in a friendly and very informal atmosphere. Tensions and internal clashes seem to occur rarely, although an interviewee admits that 'personalisation' of a few participants often prevail over the common good of the social centre: "The problem is when the collective instances overlap to individual and personal issues and this happens very often, so that sometimes your idea against mine becomes you against me" (I4).

The *transparency* of the process seems to be assured by the public nature of decision-making during the management assembly, even if it depends on the kind of decisions, because there is an informal group (the most engaged and the oldest activists) who previously discuss the more important issues and move for proposals, that, nonetheless, have to receive the assent by the assembly: "the transparency of the process depends on the kind of decisions; obviously, like in every place, there is a group recognized as the one determining the life of the centre, that is as a reference group, so that when a certain issue arises, a 'Gordian knot' to untangle, you can go to that people who lead the centre. The most important issues are always discussed within the assembly but, like in every group, it happens sometimes that, before the assembly, I meet you, you meet another people, we compare our opinions and, maybe, a common opinion arises, so that I can find an affinity with you, our common opinion can be proposed within the assembly and it can or cannot be accepted". (I4)

The decisional method adopted by Auro during the meetings should be the consensual one, similarly to the other social centre, as the interviewed senior militant states: "there is always the search for consensus… there are never voting" (I2). Nevertheless, the youngest activist describes a different process in which the method adopted oscillates between the *consensual one* preferred by activists, although considered scarcely realistic, and the ma-

joritarian one, used to solve internal divergences and conflicts, when unanimity is not reached: "Our method is a good mediation between the two methods (*consensual and majoritarian*), because we are aware that unanimity is difficult to reach. Not always everyone agrees, thus there is a majority, there isn't another way. We think it is difficult finding an unitary position about a specific issue, like so it is difficult that everyone says 'yes', and if an issue splits the assembly we have a problem; in fact, as far as divergences and internal conflicts are concerned, the true problem is if these can be solved or not. Usually it is possible, but the problem arises about the choice between majoritarian or consensual method; so that we firstly try to search as much as possible the consensus, especially through mediation, but if it isn't possible, we take a decision by majority rule "(I4). In this case, activists adopt the majoritarian method to avoid the 'decisional stalemate' by voting, even if it occurs rarely: "if an agreement is impossible to reach, there will be a decision taken by majority, because we can't stop or fossilize, we have to do something and a decision must be taken; the voting, eventually, is for show of hands, but rarely we come to this kind of situation" (I4). Therefore, a 'culture of doing something' emerges, that is the willingness to make activities, even if not always shared by everyone, as another trait of collective identity.

The *preferences transformation* usually occurs when unanimity decisions are taken and rational argumentation are used during debates. This transformation is facilitated, in the opinion of the interviewees, thank to the low ideological rigidity and pragmatism of Auro members: "Obviously pragmatism prevails, we have to try to rationalize, simply because we have scarce resources. It is not coherent to our values the imposition of a choice. One of the best trait of Auro is its openness, that is the tendency to avoid impositions and the preference to shared decisions. In my opinion a transformation of preferences and a change of positions are possible through debate, although obviously it depends on the skills in supporting a thesis; in general we avoid to stall on a position, simply because we lack a precise line to follow and, on the contrary, we create every day our line; and this is a truly positive aspect compared to other places, where there are political directives as like in a party and if you don't follow the line you can be labelled as a traitor" (I4). In fact, differently from Experia, decisions taken not always are rigidly binding for all members, because people disagreeing with a decision are not obliged to implement them, as a consequence of the internal autonomy of Auro members. Therefore, preferences transformation not always happens, because when initial different positions expressed by

participants remain far from each other during the process, the preferences are aggregated by voting and a decision taken by majority rule.

Finally, the internal decision-making seems to be closer to the deliberative-assembleary model than the others, because the method adopted is 'mainly' but not exclusively the consensual one and the majoritarian one is used when a unanimous decision is not taken. Besides, when preferences are not transformed because unanimity is not reached, they are aggregated by voting in order to take anyway a decision.

4.2.2. Relationships with movements and other SMOs

As mentioned above, Auro is not affiliated to any social centre network or national political area and as a social centre as a whole does not have relation with other social centres or political groups outside of Catania, nor makes part of extra-local coordinations; nevertheless the two senior militants keep contacts and relations with other nationwide movement organizations, even though more individually than as representatives of the social centre, as an interviewee admits: "we don't have a national area with which we identify ourselves; we don't make part to any extra-urban coordination, we are very isolated. There isn't a 'shared axis' with other social centres. There is a senior activist who keep contacts with the others, but he is an individual, we don't' have a collective which discusses about these things; a single person cannot aggregate a social centre with another" (I4).

Concerning the relations toward outside and participation to broader movements, at urban level, Auro activists have had and have good relations with almost all other local SMOs and, more recently, especially with the voluntary association Iqbal Masih and the Young Communists. The latter in particular interact often with the social centre where they organize most of their political initiatives; in the opinion of an interviewee, for the young militants of PRC, Auro is a place where they can freely express their political message also differently from the political line of their party, thus politically recognizing the social centre for this: "Auro is for them a 'vent-hole' and they use it to send a message also against the line of their party. They have a great respect for our work and are one of the few realities which recognizes our political work, even if it is very thin" (I4).

On the contrary, Auro do not have direct relations with the activists of Experia, considered too politically far, ideologically rigid, the "hard and pure ones" of the movement: "We haven't a direct relationship with Ex-

peria, nor we can have it. We have a relation with them just within broader relations with the movement as a whole, where we cohabit with them. A direct relation is impossible because our political line is too different and actually incompatible. I am not agree with their political line nor with the methods they use. The same kind of distinction is also nationwide. In my opinion, currently, "hard and pure" is an obsolete political word" (I4).

Incapacity, or lack of willingness in acting as a unitary political actor is reflected in the peculiar kind of participation by Auro to campaigns, urban movements, structures and co-ordinations, included the Catania Social Forum, during the years. As a matter of fact, Auro usually does not participate as a social centre as a whole, but through their single groups or single activists, depending on the kind of issues or campaigns, as stressed by the interviewed activists: "Not everybody participates to local movement meetings, someone participates more than others, someone follows just specific issues, but generally speaking they are always the same people. Participation is very simple. Who participates to a meeting, then relates the debate within his group of reference, because - I repeat - Auro is not a political collective actor and as a consequence single groups and collectives are more interested than Auro as a whole to participation to local movement meetings" (I2); "if you look at all the initiatives and campaigns organized in Catania during last years, you'll hardly ever find the sign of Auro among the subscribers, because many of us individually participated to them (I4).

This peculiar kind of participation to local movements entails another characteristic, that is the frequent hospitality to the most part of the local movement initiatives (assemblies, debates and so on), not only for the availability of the activists but also because Auro is considered by other groups as an open and "neutral" space for its inclusiveness and, according to an interviewee, for its political weakness: "Although you can't never find an adhesion to a campaign or to a coordination by Auro, somehow everything passes through Auro. Many assemblies take place here because Auro has the advantage to be able to create aggregation: our political weakness, while doesn't allow us to make politics, makes Auro a sort of catalyst, because we are obliged to keep many relations with other external groups. We make our place available to the town, so that every movement knows that it can use Auro. We host and promote also initiatives of other people and groups: when somebody decides to use Auro for his initiative, we do as much as possible to make him at ease and, in that moment, we are active part of his work" (I4). "Obviously, Auro is involved as a whole just when it hosts many initiatives: it has the characteristics enabling the or-

ganization of great initiatives, so that it can be used by many people and this is its peculiar trait. Thus the relation between Auro and inter-groups is based precisely on this valence: being a structure where it is possible organizing initiatives" (I2). Also here what is perceived as a problem (political weakness), it is also claimed as a specific feature of Auro collective identity (inclusiveness and recognition as an open and hospitable place).

The Auro activists who participate to local meetings are not delegated by assembly, but propose themselves depending on their availability or their interests on the issues faced: "Who follows initiatives of the movement is not selected but nominated himself, depending on his availability and his interest on that issue. For instance, if there is an assembly about X and if nobody is interested or well-motivated, nobody will participate, even if it could be interesting or sharable; vice versa it happens sometimes that somebody decides to participate for instance, to every initiative about antifascism because he is particularly interested, so that he will be a link between Auro and outside, relating and connecting" (I4). Those who participate as representatives of the internal groups of Auro, will relate about positions and decisions taken within local assemblies to their internal groups: "The problem could concern which group decides to participate or not, but actually this kind of problem is reduced by the relatively small size of the groups, composed by no more than five persons, so that they are quite cohesive and also can move quickly" (I2).

The activists participating as representatives of Auro, when it rarely happens, have decision-making autonomy within the principles of Auro, but they are somehow bound to the received mandate entailing the assurance to represent the position of Auro or, eventually, to re-discuss every change of position within the assembly of the social centre: "If Auro takes a position about a specific issue, the one who will participate to the movement meetings, he will be bound, and his participation will be not as an individual one, but as a representative of Auro; coherently, this kind of participation normally involved at least two or three people and never a single one. As a consequence if, while I'm representing Auro during a meeting, the decision taken by the movement is completely opposite to our position, I can't adhere and I have to state the momentary lack of adhesion by Auro. There is a margin of autonomy in the management of this kind of situations, but of course nobody would take the responsibility to adhere to a really opposite decision" (I4).

Therefore, because rarely Auro acts as an unitary actor during participation to wider movements, it is very difficult to single out which type of external decision-making its activists adopt. When they act as individual actors or representative of the internal groups, it can be said that individuals are probably more incline to transform their preferences and then to act according to the two decisional models closest to the deliberative pole (Deliberative or Deliberative-Assembleary), whereas the activists representing the internal groups – which are small and cohesive – are probably more incline to keep their preferences aggregated and to interact with other groups according to the two decisional models closest to the assembleary pole (Assembleary-Deliberative or Assembleary).

Finally, when activist represent Auro as a unitary actor, they are bound to the mandate of the management assembly, although not in a rigid way, having thus a margin of autonomy in their choices. Therefore, they usually negotiate with other SMOs to find a shared solution, an agreement, (rarely voting) keeping aggregated their preferences, but sometimes they can transform them (thanks to their limited autonomy) to pursue unanimity decisions, according the Assembleary-Deliberative Model.

5. Comparative concluding remarks

In conclusion, I would like to make some considerations regarding the findings of my research and the hypothesis formulated in the introduction from a comparative perspective.

First of all, and after the general review made in the second part of this work, it is necessary to reaffirm that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to consider the area of social centres in Italy as a social movement as a whole, because internal differences are much more numerous than common features and, above all, in the perception of the same activists most divergences are conceived as incompatible. Usually social centres belonging to different national areas and networks, frequently in the same city, rarely communicate and collaborate, and often are not only in competition within the movement for the hegemony of the same audience, but do have indifferent or very hostile attitudes among one other.

The two empirical cases studied in Catania do not represent an exception to this rule: they do not have direct relations, because they consider themselves too different and far from the other social centre. As a matter of fact, if we look at the two social centres investigated, Experia and Auro,

from a comparative perspective, we can easily notice that their main dimensions are all different, as you can see in the Table 2.

According to the typology of Dines (1999), Experia is a "political" squat which organizes political activities and campaigns, and it is also characterized by its social intervention oriented to the lower classes of the neighbourhood in which it is located, while Auro is a typical "countercultural" social centre mainly promoting cultural and artistic activities, giving less importance to the political ones, and is oriented above all towards the youths of the city. As far as other dimensions are concerned, while Experia belongs to the national area of the "Revolutionary Communists", with a more exclusive collective identity based on a radical Marxist ideology, Auro is a non-affiliated social centre – it does not belong to any national network – with a more inclusive common identity, because its members have heterogeneous ideological leanings. Their denominations, CPO (Occupied People's Centre) for Experia and CSA (Self-managed Social Centre) for Auro, indicate their different positions towards law and state institutions: the first is an illegally occupied social centre, whose members refuse in principle any contact with institutions, considered their enemy; the latter is officially assigned by local administration, after have been squatted for many years, and its activists are open to negotiations with institutions.

As regards their organizational structures, they could seem similar, both horizontal, non-hierarchical, based on the refusal of delegation upward and on the primarily role of the management assembly, but actually they differ significantly because the structure of Experia is more cohesive and homogeneous, whereas Auro is fragmented in several groups which manage autonomously their own internal spaces.

In connection with this last aspect, the two social centres investigated significantly differ, as regards also the main features I have focused upon in this paper: the internal decision-making (Inside) and the external one (Outside), that is the way in which activists interact with other SMOs in movement decisional arenas. As you cans see in the Table 2, Experia and Auro activists follow different models of democracy, both inside and outside, referring to the typology proposed in the introduction.

In fact, as far as the internal decision-making is concerned, it can be said that the process of Experia is closer to the Deliberative Model, while that of Auro to the Deliberative-Assembleary one. Although both social centres activists refuse the internal principle of delegation (the self-management is its denial), adopt the consensual method to solve internal divergences and

to take unanimous decisions, transforming their preferences during the debates, they considerably differ when unanimity is not achieved; while Experia occupants never aggregate their preferences (never vote nor negotiate), no decision is taken and issues under discussion are momentarily suspended to be afterwards faced, the Auro activists aggregate their preferences by voting (majority decision) in order to take a decision in any case (not always implemented by minorities). Therefore, the Experia 'inside' decision-making is always deliberative, while that of Auro is only 'mainly' but not exclusively deliberative, because it becomes assembleary when their activists are not able to take unanimous decisions.

Table 2. Main dimensions of the social centres in Catania

Dimensions	EXPERIA	AURO
Type of social centre	Political	Countercultural
Type of activities	Political and social	Cultural and political
National area	Revolutionary Communist	Non-affiliated
Ideology	Radical Marxist	Heterogeneous
Collective identity	Exclusive	Inclusive
Denomination	CPO	CSA
Legal position	Illegally occupied	Officially assigned
Attitudes towards Institutions	Closedness, refusal	Openness, negotiation
Organizational structure	Cohesive	Fragmented

Therefore, in a comparative perspective, Experia internal process is more deliberative than that of Auro, according to the dimensions of the models proposed. Nevertheless, we can not forget that "deliberative process take place under condition of plurality of values, including people with different perspectives but facing common problems" (della Porta 2006: 2), and Experia deliberative decision-making occur in a context ideologically much more homogeneous than the one of Auro, because the latter is more inclusive of the former; moreover, other dimensions (equality, transparency, orientation to common good, rational argumentations) have to be taken in account in order to define a decision-making as deliberative, according to literature (*ibid.*; della Porta and Diani 2006) and, because they have been analysed but not operationalized in this paper, thus I have considered the two decisional processes more or less deliberative only referring to the typology of democracy models.

Table 3. The internal and external decision-making of the social centres in Catania

DECISION-MAKING	**CPO Experia**	**CSA Auro**
Internal (Inside)	Deliberative Model	Deliberative-Assembleary Model
External (Outside)	Assembleary Model	Assembleary-Deliberative Model

Besides it is necessary to remember that the Experia militants define their decision-making as "assembleary", because in their view this term means that all decisions are taken during the assembly, while "deliberative" is perceived as a neutral adjective that means "decisional", and not a specific way to take decision thorough consensus. Moreover, never in their political conception, do they call their practices as "democratic" but always as "revolutionary" or "antagonist" and based on the principle of self-management, because for them "democracy" means only "representative democracy", which represents – together with capitalism - the target of their conflictual actions. Almost likewise, the Auro activists also call their practices "antagonist" on the basis of the self-management principle, and "democracy" is neither a value nor a model. In sum, according to the conception of the social centres' activists, their practices do not follow differ-

ent and alternative models of democracy, as these are instead defined in literature, but they are conceived as a different way of doing politics: as it often happens, not always the categories of the scholars coincide with those of the activists.

Even as regards the external decision-making, the two social centres differ according to diverse models of democracy: Experia militants keep relations in a way closer to the Assembleary Model, while Auro activists interact with other groups according to the Assembleary-Deliberative Model. The former present themselves always as a unitary actor, never transform their preferences - on the contrary, they try to transform the preferences of other participants and to aggregate them to their own – and always strategically negotiate with other SMOs to reach an agreement or a compromise (rarely vote); when a shared solution is not found, Experia occupants do not accept the decisions of majority and exit from the arena. On the contrary, the latter hardly participate as delegates of Auro, but mainly as individuals or as representatives of their internal groups, without a single model as reference (they can act each time according to a different model); when activists represent Auro on the whole, usually negotiate with other participants to find a shared solution (rarely vote) keeping aggregated their preferences, but sometimes they can transform them (thanks to their limited autonomy) in order to achieve unanimity decisions. In both cases the activists who participate as representatives of the social centre to the movement meetings, act on the basis of a mandate, but the Experia militants are rigidly bound to decisions taken in their internal assembly, according to the principles of direct democracy, while the Auro ones are more autonomous in their choices.

As you can notice, the decisional processes of Experia are placed on the extreme poles of the continuum – the deliberative one for the 'Inside', the assembleary for the 'Outside' – whereas the processes of Auro are situated in the intermediate points which correspond to the mixed model, the Deliberative-Assembleary one for the 'Inside' and the Assembleary-Deliberative for the 'Outside'. In my opinion it is not casual, but it could depend on the different degree of ideological rigidity (high for Experia, low for Auro) or type of collective identity (more inclusive the one of Auro, more exclusive the one of Experia).

On the basis of these findings, my initial hypothesis appears only partially confirmed, because the research have provided unexpected outcomes, at least those concerning one of the cases investigated. In fact, while the results of the research regarding Experia decisional processes confirm the

hypothesis that they are characterized by the Deliberative Model for the 'Inside' and by the Assembleary Model for the 'Outside', the findings concerning Auro decision-making, both internally and externally, are different, even if not opposite, from those hypothesized in the introduction; the processes of the latter social centre can be defined according to the intermediate models, surprising above all for the use of the majoritarian method and the aggregation of preferences within Auro internal decision-making.

The unexpected findings can be explained, as mentioned in the introduction, through the procedure of re-identification (ends) and/or cultural re-collocation (beliefs and information), according to Pizzorno (2007a). The Italian sociologist, criticizing the rational choice theory (see Pizzorno 1986; 2007b), states that when an unexpected action happens (because the hypothesis foresaw, given certain circumstances, another type of action), it does not mean that it was irrational or not understandable, but that we have to find another kind of rationality to explain it, re-identifying the ends (re-identification) and/or beliefs and information (re-collocation) as different from those we initially supposed (Pizzorno 2007a: 70). In fact, an action can be explained when it is carried out for certain reasons, that is when the means adopted, on the basis of beliefs and information owned by the actor, are effective and coherent to pursue certain ends; when the means adopted appear incoherent or ineffective, it means that the ends and/or the beliefs/information are actually different from those previously supposed as real; thus we have to change the ends and/or the beliefs (identifying the real ones) to reconstruct the meaning of the action, thus re-establishing its rational coherence (*ibid*: 64-65).

Considering my research, I started form the hypothesis that all social centres, in the internal decision-making, adopted exclusively the consensual method (means), in order to take always unanimity decisions, that is firstly shared by all members, then if possible also effective (ends), given their beliefs based on the refusal of delegation and hierarchy and on the principle of self-management. But, discovering that in one case, Auro decision-making, the consensual method is not exclusively adopted, because it becomes majoritarian when unanimity is not reached (means), I have to change its ends (re-identification) and/or beliefs (re-collocation); in fact, the end of Auro decisional process is its effectiveness, that is a choice must be made in any case, possibly a unanimity decision otherwise a majority one, because its beliefs, even sharing the same values above mentioned, in addiction stress more the preference for the 'culture of doing something' (action in any case) and internal autonomy, rather than for collective

choices and the social centre cohesion (preferences on the contrary shared by Experia activists).

Thus I have re-established the internal coherence of decisional processes according to scheme 'ends-beliefs-means'; that is, the two social centres adopt different means, because their ends and beliefs are different, although not completely; in other words they do not share the one and the same collective identity, conceived in this scheme as "a set of beliefs and preferences of the actor at the moment of the choice (*ibid*.: 67). Experia (exclusive) identity, in fact, is based on the refusal of delegation (autonomy) and hierarchy, but also on a radical version of Marxist ideology which stress the values of 'collectivity' (community), internal cohesion and social aggregation; Auro (inclusive) identity - a mix of ideologies - is also based on the refusal of delegation and hierarchy but, on the contrary, underline more the preferences for the 'culture of doing', pragmatism, and for the self-management of their spaces (internal autonomy)

As far as the 'outside' decision-making is concerned, the mechanism is the same, although ends pursued and means adopted change (not the beliefs/identity which are the same). Experia militants adopt strategic negotiation and preferences aggregation (means), because their ends are not the achievement of unanimity decisions, but pursuing exclusively pro-decisions within movement decisional arenas, that is choices favourable to their political positions, given their beliefs which also imply ideological rigid attitudes towards other groups (exclusive identity). On the contrary, Auro activists sometimes aggregate and sometimes transform their preference (means) because, participating mostly as individuals or representatives of internal groups, rarely as unitary actor within movement decisional settings, their ends are pro-decisions but not in any case, given their beliefs which also imply more pragmatic and flexible attitudes towards other SMOs (inclusive identity).

Nevertheless, in my opinion this explanation is not completely exhaustive, because if it is true and obvious that the (immediate) ends of decision-making are those of taking decisions (shared or not), it is also true that these choices are in their turn means to pursue other ends; thus we have to find the (long-term) ends followed by decisional processes, answering the question: Why social centres activists take collective decisions 'Inside' and participate to movement decisional arenas 'Outside'? Internally, they make choices because they want to establish rules, to take positions on certain issues but, above all, to make radical political collective actions which they

call 'antagonist', and social and countercultural activities, defined as 'self-managed'; thus we have to find what kinds of collective action/activities are chosen as the outcome of decision-making (manifest ends). Experia militants prefer social aggregation activities and radical political initiatives, while Auro activists are more oriented towards countercultural and self-managed activities. Externally, all social centres members interact with other SMOs in order to promote and participate to politically shared movement initiatives, but while for Auro is important above all to take part to the movements, for Experia the goal is obtaining shared political choices.

But there is another end pursued by participating to decisional processes, although not explicitly manifest (latent), that is keeping and strengthening of collective identity, which depends on the coherence of choices made during the time (Pizzorno 2007a: 27); therefore, activists have to make coherent decisions, not only regarding the content (ends) but also the way in which they are taken (means), in order to keep their identity. If identity is different, also ends and means will be different, of course. Nevertheless, if we conceive collective identity not only as a specific set of beliefs and preferences shared by a group, but also as a process by which social actors recognize themselves - and are recognized by others - as a part of this group (della Porta and Diani 2006: 91; Pizzorno 2007a: 23),[14] coherence of choices made will ensure recognition to identity.

Therefore, for Experia militants it is coherent adopting (Inside) the Deliberative model (consensus and preferences transformation) in order to make radical political actions and social aggregation activities, and (Outside) the Assembleary one (negotiation and preferences aggregation) to pursue politically shared movement initiatives, because given their beliefs, they recognize themselves and are recognized by others as a social aggregation place (Inside) and as a radical cohesive and unitary actor (Outside), thus keeping and strengthening their identity. In fact, concerning for instance the internal decision-making, majority decision would be too dangerous for the identity and cohesion of the group, because it could entail internal rifts too deep to be healed between majority and minority. The length of the process and the risk of the decisional stalemate are the eventual costs to pay in order to preserve their cohesion.

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[14] Other social actors are those that Pizzorno call 'Circles of Recognition', which "are formed by people we know are able to judge, directly or indirectly, the choices of the actor, even if he does not have any intention to belong to their group" (2007a: 146).

On the contrary, Auro activists make coherent choices adopting the intermediate models in order to make countercultural and self-managed activities (Inside), and to participate to movement initiative (Outside), because given their beliefs, they recognize themselves and are recognized by others as an 'open and neutral place' to all SMOs (Outside), where people can autonomously manage internal spaces (Inside), thus keeping and strengthening their identity. The eventual formation of majorities and minorities in the internal decision-making, differently from Experia, does not jeopardise the low cohesion of the group nor their identity, because in their conception it is more important to be free to manage autonomously the internal spaces, than the feeling of belonging to a broader community (the social centre as a whole).

This connection between different models of decision-making processes and identities, varying from a SC to another, recalls the concept of "group style" elaborated by Paul Lichterman, that is "a recurrent pattern of interaction that arises from a group's taken-for-granted understandings about how to be a good member in a group setting. Group style is how people coordinate themselves as a group; there are different ways to be together as a group, and thus different group styles" (2006: 539). In fact, decisional processes can be included in "recurrent patterns of interaction", depending on collective identities, which in turn comprise "group's taken-for-granted understandings"; so they vary according to different group styles, but always maintaining group bonds (internal cohesion) and drawing group boundaries (*ibidem*: 540).

Lastly, I am surely aware that these results are valid only for the empirical cases investigated, and they cannot abruptly be generalized to other social centres, although "comparative analysis can contribute to obtain valid inferential conclusions" (Isernia 2001: 149). At any rate, the models of internal and external decision-making proposed could be a useful analytical tool for future research, extending it to other empirical cases in other urban areas.

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