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.