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).