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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Dialogic practices of urban gardening in Rome: “Reading for difference” in social innovation

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ABSTRACT

The paper contributes to the debate on the polyvocal nature of social innovation via the exploration of one of its principal manifestations: urban gardening. Initially, we wonder whether the dualistic reading of urban gardening, as a neoliberal vs revolutionary political initiative, is appropriate and productive, or rather, we should recognize its intrinsic ambiguity and boundary-blurring nature as able to produce novelty. Following Gibson-Graham’s intuition that escaping dichotomies can produce creative socio-political alternatives, we explore the gray area where confrontational stances turn into dialogical practices. We dig deep into the character and agency of three exemplary urban gardening initiatives in Rome, included in the network of Zappata Romana. Our telling shows the inadequacy of a binary reading and sheds light on whether and under what conditions the polyvocal – and contradictory – nature of urban gardening, and social innovation, in general, represents a generative terrain for socially emancipatory and creative practices.

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Introduction

Over the last two decades, the debate around urban gardening has raised important issues for critical researchers. These revolve around: possibilities of fostering creative urban planning practices in the age of neoliberal urbanism; interrogating the extent to which such practices differ from traditional grassroots activism; while being at once able to escape neoliberal co-optation or institutional normalization. The possibility for defining activism (at least partially) outside the realm of radical outspoken politics, by encompassing everyday makers (Bang, 2005) has further fueled the debate, by discussing do-it-yourself urbanism (Douglas, 2018), quiet activism (Hackney, 2013; Pottinger, 2017), social non-movement (Bayat, 2012), and slow-motion revolution (Thomson, 2020). These experimental micro-politics of everyday life (de Certeau, 1988) – despite not necessarily vocal or visually impacting – represent spatialized expressions of the political commitment that revitalizes community and shared ideals.

In this context, it has been argued that urban gardening is an exemplary form of social innovation, presenting an ambivalent nature and multiple internal tensions between

radical and institutionalized political aspirations (Tornaghi & Certomà, 2019). However, as Ginn and Ascensão claimed in a recent article today

The consensus is that community gardens are neither straightforwardly a radical site of hope nor subservient to broader processes of neoliberalisation. [...] Research, it seems, no longer aims to reconcile, or overcome community gardening's contradictions, but rather to investigate their mixed socio-ecological histories and implications. (2018, p. 930)

This ambivalence is acknowledged as constitutive of urban gardening and, we claim, of diverse social innovation practices in the neoliberal age. Despite dichotomous categories still being at work (see Isabelle Stenger in Ginn & Ascensão, 2018), we suggest that social innovation is, in general, creative and cannot be limited by a priori judgment.

We wonder, thus, whether defining, purifying, and categorizing social innovation initiatives according to their political inspirations or aims, and ascribing them to one of the poles of co-optation *vs* resistance practices (Elwood, 2006) is appropriate and productive; or rather, we should recognize their intrinsic multivocal nature.

Building upon evidence from urban gardening literature and specific cases, our analysis revolves around the following questions: how can we escape a dichotomous reading of social innovation in terms of co-optation *vs* resistance and account for the shadows, overlapping and tensions that characterize it? How do social innovators deal with this ambiguity, and how is this functionally mobilized to produce innovation?

Our research examines urban gardening initiatives in Rome – which range from institutional to revolutionary – in order to disentangle the imbroglio between advocacy and dismissal of the gardens' transformative capacities. Following Gibson-Graham's intuition that escaping dichotomies and blurring boundaries can produce fertile ground for “possibilities where none formerly existed” (2008, p. 620), we show that socio-political commitment and innovativeness of grassroots initiatives is not necessarily associated with antagonistic practices or vocal contestations, rather, these forms of micro-political agency can equally serve our purpose.

In the next two sections, we focus on the dichotomous reading of urban gardening and social innovation, respectively. Whilst outlining both sets of literature, we recognize the polyvocal nature of their object of investigation, maintaining a binary tension between co-optation and emancipation. Through this, we focus on how Gibson and Graham's “reading for difference” approach can help in overcoming this dichotomous, binary bias. We then introduce our case studies in the Roman landscape of urban gardening and present a detailed analysis that shows how heterogeneous actors, with differing backgrounds and agendas, gather around temporary but shared purposes. The subsequent section highlights how overlapping interaction and contamination of diverse approaches produce innovation that is sometimes ephemeral or unintended yet successful in calling for the participation of local communities. We conclude with lessons learned from the Roman experience toward “reading for difference” in the broader domain of social innovation.

The dichotomous Reading of urban gardening (and beyond)

Amongst other forms of urban activism, urban gardening is understood as generating new public spaces in the city and blurring public-private boundaries in a myriad of

ways (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; McClintock, 2014). It is thus defined as a “political hybrid” (Milbourne, 2021, p. 2907). This has in fact been elaborated on by some authors as a progressive attempt at contrasting the forces of neoliberalism (Tornaghi & Certomà, 2019) and to create “counter-hegemonic spaces” (Dirlik & Prazniak, 2001). Others have contested that gardening represents neoliberal, middle-class forms of civic participation (Pudup, 2008; Stehlin & Tarr, 2017) and therefore contributes to, rather than contrasts, neoliberal trends (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014, p. 1095; Quastel, 2009).

We hold that it is not merely a matter of different *interpretations* of urban gardening that diverge: actual differences between existing practices call us to temper radical enthusiasms. Careful consideration must be attributed not only to the transformative and cohesive but equally to the divisive or marginalizing effects of gardening on the communities that emerge in the gardens and around them. Through this, we claim that the univocal characterization of urban gardening as an expression of political commitment in neglected spaces or low-income areas, performed via growing food or flowers (Milbourne, 2021, p. 2906) needs to be carefully considered.

A limited yet growing number of researchers have attempted to overcome the reading of urban gardening in terms of practices co-opted by neoliberal institutions versus practices aimed at resisting them, by addressing its internal contradictions (Crossan et al., 2016; McClintock et al., 2021). As a matter of fact, as Tornaghi and Certomà (2019) summarize:

These practices are generated by a complex political universe of urban gardeners whose aims (taking power, contesting power, abolishing powers, etc.) and means (pacific/pacifistic/peaceful protest, direct action, guerrilla up-rising, riots, cultural opposition, DIY practices, etc.) are definitely heterogeneous; and whose struggles are often the result of their participation in and learning through translocal networks (p. 4). The politically contradictory nature of urban gardening has been discussed already, for instance, by McClintock et al. (2021) in their analysis of gardens in Portland and Vancouver. They explain how,

practitioners’ everyday interpretations of and resistance to [...] forms of regulation, and new visions and practices arising from exclusions operate in a relational manner. They come together, diverge, run parallel and converge again at different times and places, continually shaping and reshaping urban space. (p. 515)

As further example, Calvet-Mir and March (2019) compare different types of urban gardens in Barcelona, ranging from community gardens – which “strive to create spaces of resistance towards neoliberal urbanism and urban speculation and for opening up non-commodified, inclusive space” (p. 105) – up to the city council-promoted “Empty Plot Plans”. In the latter case, Calvet-Mir and March identify how the interplay of forces of institutionalization and resistance mobilized to turn the project into a driver for social agency. However, they claim it would be a mistake to consider the institutional initiatives as mere expression of neoliberal co-optation practices because new progressive and alternative outcomes may arise from them transcending the initially disciplined.

It is widely acknowledged that gardeners combine multiple ideas, resources and approaches (Flachs, 2010). These range from post-Marxist readings of autogestion and

commoning (Follmann & Viehoff, 2019; Purcell & Tyman, 2019) to political ecology's inspired moves for creating just spaces through everyday practices (Roy, 2019), or urban agroecological and post-capitalist perspectives (Van Dyck et al., 2019). All these variously engage with cyclical economic and financial crises which manifest along with reproduction processes of global capitalism (Brenner & Theodore, 2005; Corsín Jiménez, 2014). Therefore, we note that the prejudice that urban gardening is not subversive enough and exploits citizens' unpaid work to care for derelict spaces has lost its pervasiveness. Rather, initiatives of urban gardening have often proved to be in many (yet not all) cases genuine grassroots-driven attempts at contrasting social vulnerability and inequalities (Eizenberg, 2012; Hou, 2010), claiming a right to contested public spaces (Apostolopoulou & Kotsila, 2022; Schmelzkopf, 2002) or alleviating symptoms of social injustice and disassembling the social structures that underlie them (Certomà, Sonderman et al. 2019; Reynolds, 2014).

However, like other non-vocal forms of activism (Pottinger, 2017), urban gardeners' agency is often disregarded as lacking the symbolic or physical presence that characterizes more outspoken manifestations of radical politics. Urban gardening is, in fact, often endowed with a sort of autonomous agency bringing gardeners to self-define what is political (Crossan et al., 2016) rather than seeking to clash with mainstream political processes or seek to accommodate within them. In this creative effort, urban gardening manifests its affinity with social innovation in general.

The following section discusses how these interpretations have characterized the reading of social innovation and how a more open, non-judgmental moment has emerged.

Social innovation as a contested domain

While originally understood as quests for radical alternatives to the status quo (Chambon et al., 1982), from the '80s onward, social innovation has suffered from progressive erosion of public institutions' competencies and resources entrenched social innovation with private initiatives and market interests (van der Have & Rubalcaba, 2016). Since then, the term social innovation progressively appeared in the policy agendas of liberal government, private foundations, and international institutions, making the dismantling of welfare systems and public institutions more palatable. It was not merely an interest in the economic potential of social innovation that was promoted but a specific neo-liberal interpretation of the economic sphere as the overarching framework where all aspects of social life needed to be encapsulated (see Windrum et al., 2016). The notion of social innovation has been considered in critical analyses as normative (Brandsen et al., 2016), disempowering (Avelino et al., 2019), and promoting individualization-masked-as-collectivism (Lorne, 2020). The neoliberal agenda has often not only deliberately colonized economic or financial practices and imaginaries but social ones as well (Lazzarato, 2009). Self-employment (Taylor, 2015), social entrepreneurship (Dey, 2014), corporate social responsibility (Sadler & Lloyd, 2009), sharing economy (Cockayne, 2016), start-up ecosystems (McNeill, 2017), and smart urbanism (Grossi & Pianezzi, 2017) have all contributed to stretch the gray zone between neoliberal economic and social practices.

This use was exposed during the 2008 economic and financial crises in which the weaknesses of neoliberal systems and global capitalist institutions were unveiled (Peck,

2014). The emancipatory powers of social innovation were revived and regions, cities, and even neighborhoods became the sites where social innovation was called to cope with unmet needs and market failures (Murray et al., 2010). Through the recent association with political practices working outside of the institutional framework, social innovation came back into the grassroots agency debate (Avelino et al., 2017; Törnberg, 2018). Several recent contributions have reinvigorated the relationship between social innovation and social change (Mulgan, 2007), promoting the concept of critical (Calzada, 2013; Moulaert & Van Dyck, 2013), grassroots (Martin & Upham, 2016), transformative (Avelino et al., 2017), or inclusive social innovation (George et al., 2019). Urban gardening initiatives have been regarded as one such expression (Rabadjieva & Butzin, 2022; Spijker & Parra, 2018).

As a consequence, social innovation laid in a gray zone, in-between the liberal agenda and social change. These two poles remain in a dialectical tension. Researchers have begun to question whether social innovation must forever remain understood as a mere extension of neoliberal governance techniques or whether it continues to retain some of the potential of activism, grass roots practices and the resulting social change from where it emerged, or indeed, if the two should be seen as mutually exclusive endeavors entirely with no cross over in-between. In fact, due to its ambivalent nature, together with attracting enthusiastic pleas. We align alongside those authors considering social innovation's position belonging in this gray zone (Edwards-Schachter & Wallace, 2012). The malleable concept of social innovation can be easily curved to the users' needs (Bragaglia, 2021) in research and practices (Marques et al., 2018); its fuzziness is intrinsically ingrained with its multiple purposes (see Cajaiba-Santana, 2014).

Urban gardening offers a means to further consider the concept of social innovation and re-evaluate whether such a dichotomous approach of grass roots, activist, resistance vs tool of neoliberal governance and interests should remain or whether, the consideration of this gray zone is more useful (Maglaverá et al., 2019; Marques et al., 2018). Urban gardening practices, like many other cases of social innovation, exist in a constant confrontation between offering radical resistance to, whilst being co-opted by, neoliberal ideology and the power frameworks in which it resides.

The frequent co-opting of social innovation initiatives by the neoliberal agenda has created a situation in which critical scholars tend to dismiss their politically emancipatory potential or the resistance urban gardening practices have to offer. This is the case for our understanding of urban gardening practices, which reinforces the idea that urban gardening is a manifestation of social innovation, serving the ideological framework from which it is seen to have emerged from. However, we wish to readdress this binary approach.

“Reading for difference” in social innovation and urban gardening

In the last few years, institutions of capitalist societies have opened up to the social value of social innovation. This new trend has stimulated the curiosity of scholars attempting to disentangle the alternative readings of social innovation “making room for manoeuvre within neoliberal discourse” (Thompson, 2019, p. 1174), decoupling social innovation from capitalism and exploring the space of counter-hegemonic possibilities. Current research on critical and transformative social innovation is, thus, analyzing how

specific experiences can bring about initiatives falling in the gray zone between the reformist intents of public institutions, negotiation with private sectors, and the grassroots agency of urban movement (Edwards-Schachter and Wallace define this as “hybrid social innovation”, 2012, p. 71). For instance, Avelino et al. (2019) considered whether and how grassroots-led social innovation “can stay independent, true to their principles and in control when directly engaging with powerful actors” (p. 145). Along this line, Paidakaki et al. (2018) claim that in order to be effective and enduring, progressive social innovation needs to be protected by public institutions (p. 14).

The recognition that urban gardening may operate in a gray zone where creativity emerges, not accounted for by dualistic readings of the phenomenon, echoes its association with social innovation (whose contested definition has been briefly presented above) and provided us with an entry point to explore its polyvocal nature. Leitheiser and Follman’s contributions about community gardening (2020), for instance, confirm that the institutionally promoted implementation of the smart city plan in Cologne has been able to produce empowering forms of social innovation by joining with bottom-up urban commons movements. The authors explain how framing urban gardening in social innovation discourse is useful in explaining how it can generate transformative social change and context-specific alternatives to the dominant urban development paradigm.

Most of the ongoing debate, however, still implicitly retains the distinction between two distinct realms of social initiatives, the institutional and the grassroots. In our perspective, this is a fictitious polarization that rarely corresponds to actually existing social innovation practices in general (and urban gardening initiatives in particular), a dialogical phenomenon that weaves together the entrepreneurial, competitive, and institutional inspiration with the revolutionary to account for the shadows, overlapping, and tensions.

The assumption that creative potential merely resides in one of the two poles of dualism (notably the radical political one) is, in fact, at odds with Gibson-Graham’s powerful call to search for difference wherever it emerges (2008). To follow their call, we hypothesize that novelty is made possible precisely because (and not merely in spite of) of the intrinsically dialogic nature of urban gardening (as a representative example of social innovation practice) that challenges the power geometries connecting civil society, the market and different levels of government.

Gibson-Graham (2008) claims that the “pervasivity of capitalism” narrative embeds a form of essentialism that shrinks room for change and discourages the search for alternatives. They associate it with the “reading for dominance” approach, a methodical attempt at detecting the connivances with neoliberal institutions and capitalist power at work (Gibson-Graham, 2020). They describe the reading for dominance as “negative, paranoid, conspiratorial perspective [reducing] all phenomena to expressions of some fundamental threatening thing, often neoliberalism” (p. 1173). Inspired by Gibson-Graham’s work on post-capitalism (1996, 2006) and diverse economies (2008), we eschew the negativity of dualistic reading to accept that power is an inescapable dimension of our life but it can be “de-exoticized” if we curve, trim and embroider alternative possibilities (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Along this investigative line, we attempt to read social innovation and urban gardening “for difference”, as Gibson-Graham suggests, with the aim “to uncover or excavate the possible [...] to destabilize the discourse of capitalocentrism

that situates a wide range of economic practices and identities as the same as, opposite to, a complement of, or contained within capitalism” (p. 623).

Matthew Thompson (2019) has already adopted Gibson-Graham’s critique toward a capitalocentric perspective that, he claims, is “blind to difference, [and] ironically reinforces the status quo, dampening and discouraging postcapitalist possibilities” (Thompson, 2019, pp. 1173–1174); and has explored novelty and creativity in recent research on urban transformation in Liverpool. Similarly, we identify the emergence of “creative thinking [that] often involves bringing things together from different domains to spawn something new [and] a powerful means of proliferating possibilities” (Gibson-Graham, 2008, p. 625) in urban gardening in Rome. Our investigation on urban gardening in Rome confirms the inadequacy of a binary reading and sheds light on a dialogic understanding of social innovation in general.

Cultivating innovation and creativity through urban gardening in Rome

Like many other big cities in the global North, Rome is characterized by significant disparities in living conditions. The peak of real estate prices in the ‘90s coincided with the almost total de-industrialization and tertiarization of the city activities, and the gentrification of “historical peripheries” produced a progressive displacement of less affluent people and migrants in socio-economic deprived areas, crossed by subterranean social tensions and explicit conflicts (Di Felicianantonio & O’Callaghan, 2020). The weakening of public authority and the austerity measures put in place after the 2008 breakdown deepened social inequalities and widened the economic gap, exacerbated by the implementation of neoliberal policies (Celata & Lucciarini, 2016). At the same time, Rome witnessed a proliferation of grassroots initiatives aimed at poverty alleviation and provision of public services via temporary re-appropriation, organization, and re-invention of urban void and interstitial spaces. While many of these initiatives were new in kind, others were rooted in the long-lasting tradition of autonomous grassroots politics, which has provided a solid social substrate since the 70s (see Mudu & Marini, 2016).

Amongst others, the city of Rome is rich in urban gardens, which have emerged as manifestations of dissensus toward institutional policies on public space use. Many of these are located in deprived areas affected by demographic pressure, hazardous environmental facilities, and urban sprawl (Certomà & Martellozzo, 2019). The opening and maintenance of the formerly abandoned *Parco delle Energie* (Certomà et al., 2020), the organization of art exhibitions at *Cinorto!*, or the cooking courses at *PratoFiorito* and sustainability education training at *Orto Maestro* are just a few examples. Since 2010 this vibrant panorama has been mapped by the civic association *Zappata Romana*; and counts today more than 250 initiatives (Zappata Romana, 2019). Reported cases range from collective gardens created by informal groups of citizens (e.g. *Whatszappa Foundation*, *Ortolino*, *OrtoInsorto*, *Rock Gardening*) or environmental and social associations (e.g. *O come Orto*; *100celle aperte*; *Giardino Curdo*; *Insieme per l’Aniene*), schools, social centers and elderly centers (e.g. *Coltivatorre*, *Orto dell’Accademia Americana*, *Orto di Via delle Palme-Forte Prenestino*), to guerrilla gardening attacks (e.g. *Flottiglia gardening*, *Porta Maggiore*, *Il Giardino di Tutti*) and urban farms (e.g. *La Fattoriotta*, *Casal Palocco*).

The map was originally conceived by its creators, i.e. the founders of the association Zappata Romana, as part of an investigation on public space use in Rome but turned into a self-acknowledgment and networking tool for most of the gardeners involved in the reported initiatives. Zappata Romana itself was initially established as a pro-bono share of the workload of the private society *StudioUAP-Urban Architecture Project*; but the work with the urban gardening movement soon became a prominent commitment. Having working knowledge of the city space, the rules regulating its use, and the technical tools to change it, Zappata architects participated in garden organization meetings, lobbied local institutions, and negotiated with interested businesses. Networking, consultancy, and training events periodically organized by Zappata helped the gardeners to take advantage of existing possibilities or find alternative ways to access land to advance grass-roots projects in the absence of financial, legal, or technical support from public or private institutions. Mapped initiatives show the everyday coexistence of practices embedded within the (re)production of the neoliberal city, together with those aimed at contrasting the privatization, deregulation, and marketization of public space. In the San Lorenzo neighborhood, for instance, a private owner granted three citizens associations permission to create a small playground in his abandoned garden. In the Garbatella neighborhood, local families occupied a large brownfield in which a public-private partnership failed to deliver renovation works. The success of the vegetable garden they created, called *Orti Urbani Garbatella*, induced the administration to change initial plans. Again, in the Prato Fiorito neighborhood, a social cooperative adopted and cared for a derelict public garden and turned it into a vineyard whose products are sold to fund projects in Southern Countries. In the material implementation of social innovation initiatives, cooperative entrepreneurship coexists with subversive practices through mixed forms of agency, including resistance, collaboration, and negotiation. For instance, the *Villaggio95* project took root in the consolidated experience of an association working on health, social and economic assistance to disadvantaged people, funded by the City and the Regional administrations (Villaggio95, 2022). The 1-hectare social allotments host a broad variety of cognate initiatives (e.g. a social market and a bike repair garage) with the aim of building 20 low-energy wooden housing modules, together with daytime reception spaces for people living in difficult conditions. In addition to public support, the Village95 gathered a wide network of activists, and got the support of the ethical finance line of the Unicredit Bank.

Among the others, three exemplary projects in the Zappata Romana network (i.e. *Eutorto*, the *Giardinieri Sovversivi Romani* actions, and *Hortus Urbis*) help us grasp the dialogical nature of urban gardening as social innovation and “reading (it) for difference” according to Gibson-Graham’s suggestion, i.e. appreciating how the practice of urban gardening challenges any binary, dichotomous interpretation, and thus pushes us to reconsider the nature of social innovation in general.

In the following section, we present our case studies by describing different strategies, tactics of confrontation, and negotiation inside each experience that bring together individuals and collectives, match different ideologies, needs, desires, and expectations. To this end, we reviewed scientific and gray literature on urban gardening in Rome, which we complemented with field notes and six in-depth interviews with gardeners, followed by participant observation during the 2019 public meeting at the Hortus Urbis.

Case-studies

Eutorto

EutOrto's story started in 2009, when about 600 ICT experts (of Olivetti and Bull extraction company), mostly middle-aged workers, were laid off by the failed company Agile ex- Eutelia, a large international company whose fate was decided by speculative maneuvers. For eight months, supported by the metalworker trade union FIOM, they occupied the company building and set up a permanent campaigning spot in the Parliament square – with no results. After protests failed, about 25 of them decided to look for a collective and collaborative alternative to feed their families and find an occupation (Capponi, 2013). They sought the support of the Province administrators via European Regional Development Funds to establish a collective vegetable garden that included a space for educational and leisure activities. As succinctly summarized by one of the participants in a newspaper article of the time:

Finding yourself out of work at the age of fifty is like losing your bearings, with the sense of time expanding. The days are all the same, and it is like living suspended. Then we thought of agriculture because we had to anchor ourselves to something. Our collective garden is today a place where we can go cyclically, where we can discuss, where we can talk about work and denied rights. (Colletti, 2013)

Still today, one of the gardeners explained to us: “We were all inspired by socialist ideals and wanted an allotment to retain somewhere the spirit of solidarity that accompanied our struggle for work. We aimed at getting our jobs back and used the garden to keep our claims alive and visible” (Interview 1). One year later, in 2010, the EutOrto project finally came to fruition in a portion of the 60 hectares in via Ardeatina, where the local agricultural school managed an educational farm for about 600 students (Figure 3). The Eut'Orto project came to life thanks to the personal commitment of the school director, who bet on the success of the initiative. A large association set in the agrarian school to help autistic young people joined the Eut'Orto activities, while the participation in farmers' markets and the creation of a collective buying club guaranteed the gardeners the resources for getting tools and plants.

Initially understood as a self-aid project to complement insufficient unemployment benefits with fresh food, EutOrto soon after obtained formal economic status as a registered workers' cooperative aimed at “helping everybody involved, according to their need and regardless of the effort they put in the garden” (Interview 2). As such, EutOrto is simultaneously a product of the delocalization policies of the neoliberal working system and a creative reaction against it: “Eut'Orto was initially understood as a largely cooperative, quasi-communist experiment. However, the logistic limitations, the personal commitments, and the excessively disproportionate allocation of tasks obliged us to turn Eut'Orto into an allotment garden” (Interview 1). Although some gardeners found new jobs most continued gardening to stay together and promote cooperative and collaborative forms of production and distribution outside of the market dynamic (Ambiente Italia, 2013). In particular, since Eut'Orto allotment produced surplus vegetables than required for personal consumption, a small temporary restaurant was established.

Because of a conflict with the school director, five years later, the EutOrto project needed to look for a new home and, thanks to Zappata help, it joined one of the

bigger allotment sites in Rome, the Tre Fontane, a 2.3 ha publicly-owned and collectively-managed garden. Together with individual gardeners the Tre Fontane area hosts various individual gardeners and associations (e.g. migrant people, schools, environmental groups, neighborhood committees, etc.) whose interplay makes disputes and decision-making processes complex yet stimulating. Although today only six gardeners of the Eut'Orto project work in the Tre Fontane allotment, the experience has had some fruitful outcomes. Without previous farming experience, one of the founders established a small organic farm on the Rome urban fringe another two, after managing Eut-Orto's catering facilities, established their own business called Eu'S Il buono fatto bene [The good well done] using local food, partially self-grown.

Giardinieri Sovversivi Romani – GSR

Somewhat different is the nature of the more long-lived guerrilla gardening group in Rome, the Giardinieri Sovversivi Romani – GSR, had about 25 activists and operated from 2010 to 2017. Initially inspired by the willingness to turn the blackness of degraded urban peripheries into green, meaningful and vibrant public spaces through collective, grassroots and independent initiatives, one of the GSR initiators declared to the press:

Our guerrillas start from the suburbs (specifically from abandoned flower beds), to signal the importance of plants in our cities. The vegetable world is a source of ideological inspiration for us: in the world of plants diversity and coexistence are normal; diverse species learn to share the same space, nourishment and light. (Gatto, 2018; own translation)

Guerrilla gardening is one of the most widespread and politically rich forms of urban gardening (Tracey, 2007), since the seminal work of the Green Guerrillas in the U.S. in the '70s (McKay, 2011) aimed at attracting other citizens' and the administration's attention to the need of caring for the city (Adams et al., 2014; Hardman et al., 2018). Ephemeral and spot-on actions have been very frequent (about once a month) for the first year in peripheral areas. Later on, these became more sporadic but better organized and politically conscious as the GSR conceived gardening as a way to attract public attention on general concerns (e.g. gay pride and queer rights, Palestinian war, Occupy movement, and urban biking). GSR refused to adopt a hierarchical decision-making structure (Radio Popolare, 2010) as confirmed during our interview:

We were a horizontal group, there were no leaders, each and every one of us proposed ideas that were discussed in the assembly. We did not take subsidies from institutions, nor did we accept private sponsors. We were open to all forms of collaboration, as long as they respected the fundamentals of anti-fascism, anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-speciesism. (Interview 6)

Endowing gardening with strong ideal claims, the GSR performed over 50 interventions intended as spatialized expressions of disobedience in roundabouts, brownfields, and abandoned green areas. In the narrative of subversive gardening, the rapprochement to urban nature was perceived as an anti-capitalist gesture. They claimed that the slow rhythms of people, animals, and plants interaction suggested an alternative perspective to those “who are (or perceive themselves) outside the capitalist efficiency system to retake possession of urban spaces, to self-produce (at least part of) their food, reducing the generation gap, share knowledge, practice coexistence between different cultures and

living species” (Interview 6). Further than granting minimal food security, gardening practices offer the possibility to (partially) exit the capitalist mass production system. Therefore, the GSR dissociated from groups who merely perceive gardening as a “pimping your neighborhood”-kind of intervention: “We refuse the idea of gardening as decor/decorum, as a selfish embellishment of your personal living space” (Interview 6).

After 2017 the group progressively disintegrated, both for personal and political reasons: “Gardening in the city – particularly in the allotments – became fashionable and attracted a wide range of diverse people, most of whom shared very little of our political commitment and ideals” (Interview 6). Despite establishing stronger connections with neighborhood associations, social centers, and counterculture movements, the GSR also organized consultancy and training on organic, low-cost, and hands-on gardening with professionals (e.g. a traveling guerrilla gardening school was organized for four years). One of the founders was herself a professional architect working with flowers and gardens (Interview 6). To this end, the GSR necessarily operated in the gray zone where tensions and incoherencies are unavoidable. In everyday political gardening, for instance, despite their understanding of social innovation as a conflictual and revolutionary urban practice, GSR made realistic and pragmatic choices: “When we had to decide which tree to plant, we chose a medlar tree. If you put in an olive tree, somebody will steal it. Nobody steals a medlar tree so it is still there now” (Interview 6). Their linkages with the multiple and diversified gardening groups in the Zappata network (some of which are funded by private institutions or banks, local government administration, or European Union institutions) clearly exemplify this condition. Notably, the GSR actively contributed to the realization of the Hortus Urbis, a large collaborative project put forward by the whole Zappata Romana network (Silvi, 2012) (described in the following section).

Recently, some of the GSR engaged with other allotments and community gardens projects, bringing their guerrilla experiences along and deciding on a case-by-case basis whether commonalities with gardening partners were strong enough to keep them attached to the project. Moreover, the outputs of some of the flash-mobs survived when local inhabitants looked after them. This was the case of the Via dei Noci garden in the East periphery of Rome (Figure 1), where inhabitants kept on caring for a formerly derelict brownfield well after the GSR’s intervention; and made it a meeting point for elderly people and migrant families who were established in the neighborhood.

Hortus Urbis

In 2012, the Appia Antica Regional Park managers invited Zappata to create a community garden in an abandoned area of the park. Reading the Latin descriptions by Columella, Pliny the Elder, Cato and Virgil, Zappata planned the first existing collective allotment garden inspired by an ancient Roman model. This includes 70 vegetable species in a 225 m² area, a common space with ancient fruit trees inspired by Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and a pergola for collective lunches. The project got the support of the Rome XI Municipality and the Province of Rome to weeding up the area and preparing the soil. National environmental and food associations (i.e. Legambiente, Roma Natura and Slow Food) also contributed to the project with direct participation and provision of seeds and tools. Zappata invited all the Rome gardeners to plan, realize, and manage the garden, and this became a common space hosting educational and training



Figure 1. Flyers of the latest events at the Hortus Urbis for kids (and older kids) (graphic by Zappata Romana, CC).

initiatives (including the GSR guerrilla courses), cultural events promoted by artistic social cooperatives, schools and international universities (e.g. Cornell University, the University of Minnesota, the University of Wisconsin Rome Program, and the University of California in Berkeley) (Figure 5; Garrone, 2013) (Figure 1).

With the aim of advancing a collective, practice-based reflection to scale-up the experiences of the Rome gardens network, in 2019 Hortus Urbis hosted a public discussion on “Cultivating the city: Public space, active citizenship, and new urban ecologies”. This was part of a broader strategy to involve public institutions in grassroots initiatives and achieve a political impact by creating occasions for dialogue between gardeners, environment and social activists, administrators, academics, and journalists (Figures 2 and 3).

In the invitation flyer, Zappata wrote:

Inequalities, impoverishment, marginalization, disintegration, and exclusion generate socio-spatial injustices in the city, but also call for experimenting new forms of collective aggregation and recognition. The common denominator of these social innovation practices – now widely documented throughout Europe – is given by the informal planning processes supporting them (i.e. a shared endeavor to advance plans outside of the traditional planning format and institutional framework but still with a shared long-term vision). Urban gardening exemplary represents such practices. (Certomà, Cioli et al., 2019; own translation; Figure 7)

Following the meeting, Zappata submitted a proposal to the Call for Participatory Budget 2019 for a participatory planning project titled “Un orto in ogni quartiere” [“A

garden in every neighborhood”] (Bisso, 2020). Supported by the votes of thousands of citizens, it was granted 550 K euros. However, the administration (who was responsible for the implementation) undertook no citizens’ involvement initiative. With the requests for citizens’ involvement left unheard (Web TV 2, 2020), Zappata gathered expressions of discontent from over 140 associations (Zappata Romana, 2019) and invited every gardener to send a written complaint to the Urban Allotment Office; thousands responded. Soon after, the municipal administration ordered Zappata to stop the campaign if it did not want to incur legal actions for behaving “like a political organization”. This gave rise to a lively debate amongst the gardeners and a firm stance in response to the administration:

Are we a political organization? Urban gardening is political because it affects public spaces by mitigating social and spatial injustices. We have been dealing with public spaces and shared knowledge and passion for ten years, we won awards, we are mentioned in articles and books. Do we do it for fun? Of course, if we were not interested in collaborating with other citizens, we would not do it. With dozens of proposals from citizens, schools, and associations, we showed the administration the genuine interest for taking part in planning. (private communication from Zappata Romana, 2020, own translation)

Nevertheless, up to now, no further actions have been undertaken by the city administration to follow up with the funded proposal.

Blurring boundaries within the garden and between actors

Urban gardening in Rome is often explicitly described as an expression of social innovation in the media or in EU-funded projects (e.g. d’Antonio, 2019), where initiatives intended as antagonistic rebellions against institutional control of public space are sometimes re-proposed as reformist ones. Rather than considering this move as a mischievous attempt at concealing or making up reality, the cross-bordering attitude of Roman gardeners signal the intrinsic ambivalent and dialogical nature of urban gardening practices and, by extension, suggests that this capacity of blurring boundaries between co-optation and resistance forces within each initiative characterizes social innovation in general. Openings, emergences, prefigurations, and possibilities brought about by urban gardening cannot always be read as critical and antagonistic actions against capitalist dominance but nevertheless “challenge ingrained alignments of power that shut down the potential for multiple trajectories to take flight” (Gibson-Graham, 2020, p. 9).

The dialogical nature of gardening initiatives is evident in the presented cases. The EutOrto project was initially intended as a social experiment set by a small group of white collars with a left-wing background – actually more reformist than revolutionary. It shows how urban gardening can provide the opportunity to transform a social innovation initiative (notably, the creation of a cooperative of unemployed computer engineers who take care of common land) into economic activities that revolve around the garden but in which the logic of profit does not prevail over social needs. Negotiation with institutions was somehow necessary and not conflictual, somehow a by-product and legacy of the social struggle that started during the occupation of the Eutelia plant. From being a “recreational” occupation and a socio-political experiment, it entered the sphere of alternative economies in Rome, sustaining self-provision of fruit and vegetable for the gardeners with as a small surplus sold in alternative food networks (to support the investment in the shared garden). Eventually, it further fostered the

opportunity of self-employment for the chefs of Eu's and the establishment of an organic farm, once again crossing the boundaries between market and non-market distribution, unpaid and paid labor. The self-employment dimensions merge here with the micro-politics of creative urbanism because, in pursuing their goals, the gardeners engage with local institutions and other local actors (schools, small businesses, and associations).

The GSR group, which has been the main expression of guerrilla gardening in Rome, compared to Eur'Orto, displays a more radical agenda connecting the practice of gardening to both global and local politics of urban space. Its actions were intended to denounce the privatization of any profitable economic resource – including public space – and the whittling down of public responsibilities by exploiting citizens' unpaid work by the city administration. However, despite GSR not negotiating directly with local authorities and their practices being illicit or even illegal, they could enjoy some tolerance of their actions. This was likely a result of their agency being contextualized in the urban gardening movement in Rome and by joining the Zappata network, part of which was well embedded with local institutions.

For instance, when asked whether they define themselves as social innovators, one Zappata gardener admitted:

We happened to define ourselves as social innovators for the first time when we took part in an EU tender to access a loan. On other occasions, we discussed whether we could interpret our activity in terms of innovation, for instance during the Rome SkillShare [a free, horizontal knowledge-sharing event]. (Interview 5)

At first sight, this statement seems to confirm the harshest criticism against instrumental rebranding of existing initiatives to gain legitimacy in institutional contexts (Engelbert et al., 2019; Marques et al., 2018). Yet, despite adopting social innovation as an instrumental label, this strategic move had transformative effects in the gardeners' community, nurturing the debate about the very nature of urban gardening as political action. Bringing together a large variety of actors, Zappata also offers some sort of mediation to subjects such as GSR would have never negotiated with local administration, private businesses, or mainstream educational institutions.

By adopting a dialogic approach, Zappata affirms that, for instance, the Hortus Urbis is an innovation project intended as “a common good, a collective and practical effort toward urban green space regeneration and social cohesion strengthening” (Interview 3); and that it relies on “multiple synergies between diverse actors involved bringing about unexpected possibilities” (Interview 4). In most cases, synergic effects emerge from the gathering of diversified participants, partners, and promoters, whose agency entwines social entrepreneurship stances, smart urbanism attempts, counter-hegemonic, anti-capitalist, and commons-supportive movements. The relevance of dialogic actions between multiple heterogeneous actors has been recognized also from the guerrilla gardeners of the GSR because, although apparently contradictory with their more radical positioning, they reputed it as fundamental for elaborating widely acceptable and practicable initiatives.

Building on the belief that collective gardens are not (necessarily) a tool in opposition to institutional planning, Zappata attempted to establish working relationships with both the public and private actors without betraying its grassroots, community-oriented, and transformative inspiration. The agency of gardeners in Rome recalls Thompson's claim

that transformative social innovation is exactly about “experimenting with ‘the rules of the game’ that define a particular institutional field” (Thompson, 2019, p. 1176). There’s Zappata’s propensity to maintain strong relationships with both public institutions and grassroots organizations confirm that “initiatives firmly rooted within a radical/alternative cultural framework claiming the collective ownership of public space [...] are not cohesive organizations with a well-defined structure, but rather a constellation of groups able to mobilize themselves and other groups” (Haddock & Tornaghi, 2013, p. 298). These both act as player and game-changers. As Zappata signals, in fact, “the importance of taking risk is often underestimated while it is crucial for advancing actually innovative projects” (Interview 3). To keep multiple links active and to build upon the interplay of diverse actors Zappata, as every group engaged in social innovation initiatives, mobilize a repository of interaction modes from an oppositional and confrontational stance to forms of reciprocal recognition and cooperation, temporary alliances and networking (Haddock & Tornaghi, 2013, p. 298). While some critical thinkers might regard it as a sign of compliance with the pervasive neoliberal strategy of co-optation and “depoliticization” of grassroots agency (Swyngedouw, 2008), this interpretation only partially accounts for the real complexity of quiet and ordinary forms of engagement (Milbourne, 2012; Pottinger, 2017).

The described cases suggest that (as critical scholars claimed) to be “social”, innovation needs to be so not only in ends (i.e. serving specific political projects) but also in means (i.e. enhance people’s capacity to elaborate and test their projects) (Murray et al., 2010). The care of urban public space requires negotiation, dialogues, and compromises that, while not political ideology centered, nevertheless can materialize political ideals through vernacular practices (Baudry, 2012). As Zappata explains:

A gardening community is generally imagined as a group of people that hoe on a sunny day – and that’s it. However, the humble gesture of cultivating or pruning or reclaiming abandoned areas builds upon much greater personal and collective efforts: skills and knowledge sharing through informal channels; taking responsibility; stepping together on off-beaten paths or even disobedient ones; cooperating, co-planning, listening, and networking. The practical act of doing something together requires time and energy; it requires ideation, coordination and mediation efforts. (Interview 5)

Zappata’s endless attempts at creating occasion for dialogue are not blind to the possibility of failures, the irreconcilability of opposite positions, or power asymmetries entrenched within the material constitution of society. By recalling Richard Lake’s pragmatist position about the power of conversational urbanisms, we can say that the “hope and the expectation that things can get better must be distinguished from optimism, the claim that things will get better” (Lake, 2020, p. 272). Embracing the possibility for creative democracy and urbanism as a practice of hope implies the rejection of cynicism and requires nurturing conversation and search for communication throughout and within differences (Wyly, 2021).

Conclusion: nurturing diverse forms of social innovation through gardening

In this paper, we engaged with the problematization of the dichotomous reading of urban gardening in terms of co-optation vs resistance practices. In a recent contribution, Bach

and McClintock (2021) suggest that the distinction between institutionalized and subversive gardening initiatives is quite blurry and participants modulate the transformative potential of these projects on the base of different meanings of democratic engagement forms. We follow with it by showing how organizations or individuals change their strategies and practices in response to different socio-environmental and economic conditions along the course of the projects themselves. Notably, radical political commitment does not always manifest in radical actions (Tornaghi & Certomà, 2019) as often gardeners commit to negotiations and transgress ideological boundaries whilst seeking dialogical opening with other actors.

Therefore, the political relevance of urban gardening lies in their capacity to function as imaginative spaces for political-networked formations and collective skills improvement (Bach & McClintock, 2021). As such, many of the initiatives mapped by Zappata can be regarded as expressions of non-vocal, micro-politics performed through loosely coordinated, informally-planned actions, or as everyday and material maneuvers to disassembling reality (as it is) and reassembling (as it is hoped to become).

We repute that it is exactly the tendency to operate in a gray zone where boundaries blur that makes actual novelty able to emerge, in-between co-opted, market-oriented practices and alternative, grassroots resistance ones.

To expand this point, we built upon Gibson-Graham's claims that cultivating creativity requires us to "enlarge the space of agency of all sorts of actors – non-capitalist as well as capitalist, disorganized as well as organized, non-human as well as human" (2020, p. 626). We believe that framing urban gardening and social innovation in general as characterized by confrontational processes hampers much of its creative potential (Ziegler, 2017). On the contrary, this flourishes in collaborative, dialogical, and gray areas where nobody can be sure about the outcome and the output, but innovation precisely springs out from this uncertainty. Sitting and listening to actors that hold a different agenda is a choice that might turn out to be dangerous but also surprisingly prolific. Gardeners' dialogic practices help us when "reading for difference" in social innovation because these practices are functionally mobilized to produce actual novelty in the methods, further than in the political contents of social agency.

The prolificity of these practices confirms that creativity is not a prerogative of outspoken antagonist gestures but also of the ordinary encroachment of citizens' agency in the urban space. Accepting that social innovation can be framed in the neoliberal urban agenda does not impede it from also manifesting into progressive, emancipatory, or even radically subversive initiatives. Even in neoliberal societies, a variety of practices emerge outside the logic of capitalism because most people make important decisions driven by a logic that is not capitalist but is driven instead by attachment to people, community, or places.

The political stakes of blurring boundaries between neoliberal or emancipatory forms of urban gardening reside in prioritizing the adoption of an open, creative, non-judgmental, and dialogical method to any political content. Here openness means that opposing neoliberal urbanism is similar to a process of social innovation, whose output and outcomes cannot be foreseen a priori. Rather than outputs – i.e. the capability of gardening to secure an alternative permanent and sustainable use of land – we are more

interested with inputs. Practices of quiet activism can challenge the atomized habits of neoliberal urban societies; working together can foster a change of attitude that eventually evolves in new capabilities and attitudes. Urban gardening projects can be ephemeral (like GSR actions), turn into small business in between alternative and capitalist markets (like Eutorto) or can accept institutionalization in order to have more opportunities for establishing transformative practices (like Hortus Urbis). Such outputs are all acceptable from our standpoint as long as the outcome is developing a cooperative attitude to work together towards changing their own circumstances. As Bach and McClintock notice:

clearly, such moments of political subject formation are highly personal, unfolding at the scale of the individual. But it is important to emphasize here that the development of this new consciousness is simultaneously collective, with political subject formation evolving dialectically with the collective movement. (2021, p. 872)

The focus on dialogue rather than the oppositional dimension implies two fundamental caveats. On the one hand, the inclusivity of minority and marginal groups is often more outspoken than practiced as participants in Urban Gardening are most often white, well educated professionals. In order to fully assess the potential of Urban Gardening in Rome as a moment of open, creative and inclusive politics, the intersection with gender, class and ethnicity should be further investigated. On the other hand, dialogue and openness do not entail the uncritical acceptance of whatever partnership, ideological positions, or plans are on offer; rather the adoption of a dialogical approach makes closures and exclusion practices simply inconceivable. This instance is particularly important in an age of growing populism and far-right activism, particularly in Rome where new-Fascist movements such as *Forza Nuova* and *Casa Pound* are embedded. *Casa Pound*, particularly, has adopted hybridization with radical social – traditionally leftist and anti-fascist – tactics, such as social housing claims and food aid for the poor, obviously only the Italian ones (Froio et al., 2020, for an account of *Casa Pound*'s urban tactics see Bialasiewicz & Stallone, 2020). Albeit there is no evidence for the involvement of such groups in practices mapped by *Zappata Romana*, it is legitimate to question whether non-judgementality eventually applies to them as well. The question is less important for our case study – *Zappata Romana* is explicitly inspired by leftist values – than for research methodology (Toscano, 2019). Our positionality as scholars is that inclusivity should not apply to social movements founded on the exclusion of certain groups (for instance, migrants or LGBT + individualities) and the limitation to the self-determination of women. This is not meant to simply build on Popper's pragmatic paradox of intolerance. In fact, as Gibson-Graham explains, a non-judgmental approach is at the same time ethical and methodological:

part of the ethical challenge of engagement with other projects lies in adopting an experimental rather than a critical stance; this means that differences are examined for what they can teach us, rather than presumed to be signs of deficiency on one or the other side. (Gibson-Graham & Roelvink, 2009, p. 462)

In the described gardening initiatives, differences have been used to produce an imaginative form of politics that meshes up existing tactics ascribable to the political constellation of radical politics with the dialogic ones.

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