

Article

# Youth Activism in Political Squats between Centri Sociali and Case Occupate

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Received: 27 July 2018; Accepted: 31 August 2018; Published: 5 September 2018



**Abstract:** Nowadays a lot of research describes most young people as barely interested in politics, expressing little trust in political institutions and far from any forms of institutional political participation. Moreover, most of the engaged youth are involved in forms of participation described as more civic and social than political, weakly ideological, more and more often digital and developed in virtual space, and usually experienced as one among several components of everyday personal lives. The article explores youth activism in political squats because it is a form of participation which, in countertendency, is political and radical in its aims and strategies, explicitly ideologically inspired, strongly rooted in physical places, and often quite central in everyday personal lives. The text is based on research conducted in the city of Turin (Italy) by means of qualitative interviews, participant observation and document analysis. Four main interconnected thematic dimensions are considered: Individuals' biographical paths and meanings of activism; distinctive lifestyles and cultural sensitivities among the activists; collective narratives about contemporary society and possibilities of social change; patterns of intervention and forms of organization. On the basis of these analyses, the article maintains that this form of activism can be usefully interpreted as a real lifestyle, which has an explicit and intense political sense, but which young activists also connect with a much wider, more differentiated set of meanings.

**Keywords:** youth; politics; participation; activism; political squats

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Youth, Politics and Participation: Characterizing Traits

The article aims at reflecting upon youth political participation, focusing on the phenomenon of youth activism in political squats, on the basis of qualitative research conducted in the city of Turin in Italy.

The relationship between youth, politics and participation has been a widely studied issue in social sciences over recent decades. In Europe scholars have carried out major national and international quantitative surveys offering a comprehensive portrait of the different values, social representations, narratives, attitudes, and variety of forms of young people's social and political involvement. Moreover many qualitative studies illustrate the diverse forms of young people's participation and activism, referring both to the most traditional ones—such as involvement in political parties, trade unions and in social volunteering—and to the emergent ones—such as new social movements and, more recently, digital forms of political engagement.

Despite this huge amount of research, it is difficult to reconstruct an accurate comprehensive portrait of today's youth political activities and attitudes in this territorial context. On the one hand, the major trans-national surveys focus only on the most institutionalized and traditional forms of participation; on the other hand, it is likewise difficult to elaborate this sort of general framework on the basis of the numerous but fragmented studies about specific forms of youth activism.

Nevertheless several publications in the past decade significantly agree in proposing some distinctive traits of the current relationship between youth, politics and participation [1–6].

From these works it is clear that, on the whole, since the beginning of the 2000s, in Europe most citizens have increasingly lost trust in political systems and retreated from the more consolidated forms of participation connected with representative democracy, such as electoral participation, membership in political parties and involvement in trade unions. People today are also less committed to national political systems and mainstream political parties, as well as more skeptical of national governments and political classes [7–9].

This distance between citizens and the institutions of democratic governance is particularly noticeable among young people, who thus emerge as the sector of the population most disconnected from institutional politics [10–14]. Research shows the marks of an ongoing crisis of representative democracy: Young people, compared to adults, are less interested in politics, follow less regularly the political debate, have less trust in political systems, institutions, political parties and politicians, and are less involved in the most institutionalized forms of political participation, such as voting, activism in political parties and candidacies for formal political roles [15–23]. At the same time, however, a relevant portion of them is also aware of today's main social problems, reflective about potential solutions, and more active than adults in non-institutional forms of participation, such as social movements, protests, petitions, and in particular on-line digital socio-political activities, as well as in some forms of social intervention [2,5,24–32].

Several of these traits can also be observed in the Italian context, the national background of the research presented in this article, but some specific national features have to be underlined [33–37].

On the whole in Italy too a disconnection between youth and institutional politics is evident. Considering first of all political collocation on the left-right scale, 35–40% of youth do not express a position. Moreover, the same percentage does not choose any existent political party or declare any intention to vote. Only less than a half of young people recognize and then adopt the basic institutional political landmarks and agree—or are able—to express a personal positioning among these landmarks.

Focusing on their attitudes towards politics, the scene is not very different: Less than 5% declare that they are “politically engaged” and around 35% declare that they are uninterested in, or even disgusted by, politics. Additionally, trust in political institutions is very weak and decreasing: Political parties, parliament and government obtain the lowest levels of trust, whereas higher levels can be observed only for local or transnational institutions and “politically neutral” institutions such as schools and police. Only few young people in Italy are then directly involved in institutionalized forms of political participation or in protests events. Although more common, also involvement in associations and groups with social-intervention aims concerns a minority of youth (14% in the case of social engagement, 4% political engagement). Considering that over 90% of youth claims to debate about politics (although only occasionally), this means that only in a minority of cases does this interest evolve into active participation.

In the case of political parties, a sort of short-circuit seems to have existed for several years: On the one hand these organizations are not very interested in conquering youth votes because of the wide abstentionism in this age group; on the other hand they keep on losing legitimacy among youth precisely because these latter feel that parties are very distant from their issues and don't listen to their requests. Moreover many young people believe that political parties have no more real possibilities of intervention on relevant problems because of the transnational dimension of these problems, and that in any case little trust can be put in the possibility that parties will keep their promises after elections. Considering trade unions, the great majority of young people consider that an active role of youth in these organizations is important, but they also think that few youth nowadays feel represented by them; moreover, half of young people think that trade unions' efficacy is at the moment very weak, and that they need to be renewed, but very few of these young people are willing to be actively involved in their activities.

Certainly most youth express interest in issues of collective relevance—such as justice, inequalities, the environment, human rights—and they have little difficulty in defining which socially relevant goals politics should pursue nowadays, expressing significant willingness to engage. But while they recognize a relevant role for “politics” in the improvement of the social context, they evidently think also that the available structures and forms of political intervention are not efficient, or that personal involvement in them is not attractive.

Italian youth seem thus to be convinced of the relevance of collective action for social change, but also not to trust politicians, parties and trade unions enough to become personally involved in these organizations. Furthermore the most “active” of them prefer weakly ideological, weakly structured and weakly binding forms of participation, flexible with regard to the times and the rhythms of personal involvement as well as to the perspectives of action. In their sensitivities, personal engagement in any form of participation cannot mean exclusively an hetero-oriented activity on behalf of public interest or specific sectors of population in difficulty. This engagement should satisfy also personal needs of the activists, because it is always intended also as an auto-oriented activity, and must then give enough freedom to the individuals in customizing the specific forms of participation on the basis of their personal sensitivities. Moreover, meanings and representations connected with these forms of participation are variegated and individualized, leading to difficulty in embracing collective representations, narratives and ideologies.

Bearing in mind these general tendencies, the article explores a specific form of youth participation—activism in political squats—which, on the basis of recent research, seems to be, in countertendency, politically oriented, radical in its aims and strategies, explicitly ideologically inspired, strongly rooted in physical places, and often quite central to the everyday personal lives of the activists. There is a growing corpus of research literature about political squats, but most of these works focus on the public activities and the organizational models of these groups, whereas this article focuses mainly on activists’ motivations and perspectives, and on the wider set of their distinctive practices.

### *1.2. Youth, Politics and Participation: Interpretive Perspectives*

With regard to the picture drawn above of contemporary young people’s attitudes and behavior vis-à-vis politics and participation, scholars have proposed three main interpretations.

Some literature describes youth as mainly uninterested in public issues and characterized by a sort of socio-political apathy [10,13,38–44] connected with the prevalence of self-centered and materialistic attitudes. This is a consolidated interpretation of youth political disengagement, which in Italy for example has been repeatedly adopted in the past to interpret different historical moments of weak youth public participation, such as the 1950s and the 1980s, but which today acquires new nuances, some studies claiming for the impact of a lifecycle effect, but several others underlining the impact of the generational effect. Due to the scarcity of comparative diachronic databases and of multi-cohort studies it is not possible definitively to choose one option or the other [3,45], but it is possible to state that nowadays a significant influence on the distance between young people and public issues is also exerted by the economic crisis, and the consequent uncertainty characterizing youth’s existential condition, with a weakening of their wider expectations and projects and a forced focalization on private and present issues [5,34,35,37].

Other works rather describe youth as first of all characterized by a widespread sense of powerlessness and inefficacy, or cynicism and alienation [46–49], with consequent weak levels of socio-political engagement, due to the fact that they feel interest in, and desire for, engagement in different critical issues but they experience conjointly the lack of a correspondent offer of effective opportunities for activism. In this perspective the lack of participation among youth is mainly interpreted as a consequence of the fact that they often don’t find any opportunities for participation—either in the institutional context, or outside it—which is able to satisfy their expectations or respond to the different needs and desires they connect with the option of an experience of personal engagement.

Yet other works describe young people as significantly expressing ethical and pro-social sensitivities but through developing new forms of political activism as well as of social and civic engagement instead of more traditional modalities of participation [25,26,31,50–54]. In this perspective there is neither a generalized crisis of democratic participation nor a major disenchantment with political issues and civic concerns among youth. Rather there is a clear and extensive dissatisfaction with institutional politics, political parties and politicians, partly because young people feel that these actors and contexts do not sufficiently address their issues, concerns and interests or do not keep their promises. Volunteering and political activism outside these contexts are instead largely widespread among youth, and the economic crisis, instead of pushing young people deeper into the realms of the “private” sphere, caused an increase in several of these forms of participation [5]. These tendencies are presented as the effect of a more educated, better informed, less deferential and thus more demanding citizenry, which leads youth to develop new and more differentiated forms of participation; and also as a consequence of a marginalization of youth from the institutional political system [41,55,56], leading to weak development of interest in, knowledge of, trust of, support for and engagement with the system.

This article aims at moving from these different possible perspectives to develop an interpretive proposal for youth activism in political squats: In this perspective the analyses will consider which elements allow us to understand the choice of these young people to be directly engaged in an explicitly political form of activism, and specifically in non-institutional, radical and ideologically oriented groups such as political squats.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Research Context

Political squatting has a long history in Italy [57–65]. As is well known, the very first wave of occupations in Italy dates back to the mid-1970s, with the diffusion of the so-called “*circoli del proletariato giovanile*”. These places mainly emerged in the outskirts of the big northern cities, and—differently from the non-institutional left-wing political groups of the 1968–1972 students’ and working-class movements—did not have a traditional, explicit political program connected with a more or less creative interpretation of Marxist–Leninist doctrine. Rather they developed as places for meeting and building informal social networks outside schools and factories, which were understood as places of capitalist reproduction, or of conflict against this reproduction, imposed by the capitalist system itself. Nevertheless these groups, strongly rooted in their neighborhoods, had an explicit class-rooted conflictual political identity, and one of their distinctive traits was the claim to the right to wellbeing, meant not as “the essential”, the right to decent survival typically invoked by traditional working-class movements, but rather as the right to the inessential, to the goods and the level of life identified as specific to the upper classes. The peak of these experiences, and more generally of the new-left groups and movements of that decade in Italy, was the 1977 movement [66–69], in which there co-existed—more or less in conflict—groups more explicitly characterized by a political perspective (in a nutshell, mainly oriented towards the provocation of events of violent protest as large and as frequent as possible, with the aim of a real socio-political revolution) and groups rather more focused on the experimentation and the diffusion of new alternative lifestyles, transgressive and deviant compared with mainstream, dominant ones (with the perspective of a wider social change through the progressive diffusion of alternative everyday practices).

This complex area of movements survived only until the end of the 1970s, and was then quite quickly crushed, as a consequence of different factors such as institutional “repression” (intensified partly because of the concomitant increase of the armed struggle), internal conflicts among groups and sectors with different forms of action and perspectives and the growing spread of heroin. As a consequence, the late 1970s–early 1980s in Italy were clearly characterized as a transition period between the 1968–1977 “golden horde” [69,70] of the new left-wing social movement and the emergence of a new era, notably characterized by the role of political squats, the “*centri sociali*”.

The first political squats of the 1980s were in some cases (such as the famous Leoncavallo in Milan) the result of a transformation of political groups founded in the previous decade, but in most cases they were new groups with significantly different traits, and one of the main innovations was connected with the role in the squats movement of the punk culture which spread quickly in Italy in those years [71].

This article is specifically based on research in the city of Turin, which is—historically and still nowadays—one of the most important scenes for the occupazioni in Italy.<sup>1</sup> It is not easy to reconstruct the history of the movement in this city (even if some starting points can be found [73,82–84]), but some distinctive traits can be highlighted and can be useful to contextualize the present scene. The first occupation dates back to 1984, to the ex-cinema Diana, but it was soon evicted; subsequently further attempts were made in different places, but they were also evicted. In this period most of the activists were connected with the local punk scene, which had emerged in 1980 (the first self-managed concert—in via Artom, a street in the Mirafiori neighborhood, the historical area of the FIAT workers—dates back to 1982). In 1986 the Collettivo Punx Anarchici and the Anarchist group of via Ravenna (who previously left the Federazione Anarchica Italiana, the historical Anarchist organization in Italy) set up the Collettivo Avaria, and after some other temporary occupations, in 1987 they occupied a former kindergarten, creating the squat named El Paso. Meanwhile another group, the Collettivo Spazi Metropolitan, characterized by a Marxist perspective, in 1989 created the Centro Sociale Murazzi, occupying a former boat storage on the bank of the Po River. Both the occupations still exist today and thus represent the oldest political squats in Turin.

In the subsequent years several further buildings were occupied with the aim of creating political squats, but the division between a Marxist–Communist sector and an Anarchist sector of the movement remained and is still clearly present [85]: Significantly, during all these years the Communist occupations adopted and maintained the label “centro sociale”, whereas the libertarian ones constantly defined themselves as “casa occupata” or “squat”, to remark their positioning in the occupations’ scene.<sup>2</sup>

On the whole it is difficult to estimate the overall number of buildings occupied in Turin during these thirty years, and it is even more difficult to evaluate the number of people involved in the movement at different times. Anarchists in particular tend to occupy new buildings, almost always quickly evicted by the police, so that a comprehensive picture of the scene is not easy to draw. Nevertheless two elements can be usefully highlighted: In the late 1990s, probably the peak of the movement, twelve political squats existed in Turin, with 120 activists, 500 participants and 3000 “soft” supporters [83]. Nowadays eight main political squats exist in the city, three with a Marxist–Communist matrix (Murazzi and Askatasuna with an “autonomous” approach, Gabrio with a “Neo–Communist” approach) and five with an Anarchist matrix (El Paso with a “libertarian” approach, Barocchio, Prinz Eugen, Asilo, Mezcal with a “squatter” approach).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a comparison with other national and international cases of youth activism in political squats see [72–81].

<sup>2</sup> The article will focus only on “political squats”, that is groups who occupy buildings to develop political, social and cultural activities potentially directed also to an external public, whereas those buildings which have been occupied mainly as homes for people—both individuals and couples with children—who are not involved in these projects will not be taken into consideration (although also in these cases some public activities and events are carried on and then the boundaries between the two types are blurred). Similarly, even if at the moment one right-wing squat exists in Turin, due to the radically different and peculiar traits of this group compared with all the others, it has not been included in the analysis (on this phenomenon in Italy see [86]).

<sup>3</sup> The four labels (autonomous, Neo–Communist, libertarian, squatter) have been formulated in the previously mentioned research on political squats in Turin carried on in 1999–2001 [82,83] and their distinctive traits will be presented in the following pages. Here it is relevant to highlight that the term “squat”, in alignment with international scientific literature, will be used to refer in general to all the occupied buildings as collective projects, whereas the term “squatters” will identify one of the four areas of the movement.

## 2.2. Methodology

The research has been conducted on all the different squats through qualitative interviews with 22 activists from 19 to 39 years old (9 female and 13 male), participant observation at public protest events and public socio-cultural events, and also documentary analysis of websites, Facebook pages and flyers produced by the squats.<sup>4</sup> Participant observation during public events has been developed without explicitly declaring this activity to the other people who were present, although some activists knew the author of the article and his academic research activity as a consequence of previous research into Turin squats and protest events. The interviews have instead been obtained by presenting the research and its aims, depending on the case, either to the interviewees or to the assembly, and gaining the activists' trust and co-operation as a result of previous participation in some public events.<sup>5</sup> The research focused on eight main dimensions: Individual biographical paths of the activists; individual meanings and motivations of the activists; distinctive traits and lifestyles of the activists; collective activities and forms of protest; collective issues of intervention and aims; organizational instruments and strategies; collective representations and narratives; uses and representations of squats places and urban space.<sup>6</sup>

The different empirical materials have been coded through a qualitative content analysis approach [90–92] on the basis of the original thematic categories and on the basis of new unexpected categories appearing in the different texts. The total tree of codes is shown below in the Table 1.

**Table 1.** The tree of codes.

1. The activist	1.1. Biographical paths	(a) Contact with the squat
		(b) Previous experiences
		(c) Family background
	1.2. Political attitudes and activities	(d) Personal change through activism
		(e) Current personal forms of involvement in the squat
		(f) Personal representation of the city's socio-cultural context
		(g) Personal representation of the wider socio-cultural context
		(a) Personal meanings of activism
		(b) Further personal forms of political participation
(c) Perceived political impact of activism		

<sup>4</sup> The research did not focus on minors because the choices of this category of people, even concerning political activities, are usually strongly influenced by their parents' decisions and their involvement in the school activities, and would have required specific analyses and interpretative perspectives. The research included the so-called "adult youth" (up to 39 years old)—following previous research on the condition of youth in Italy [87–89]—because of the article's concern with reflection upon some cohort effects in today's different approaches to activism between different age brackets among young activists of political squats.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Matteo Lettere, with whom the present research was designed, and who concretely conducted most of the interviews and a part of the participant observation, in connection with the elaboration of his MA dissertation. The research has always been presented as connected with the development of the dissertation, and this surely helped in gaining activists' collaboration. All the activists interviewed, after being properly informed about the nature of the study, gave us the informed consent to participate in the study. Some of them explicitly expressed the desire to read the dissertation, or other published works, deriving from the research, and the researchers agreed to this. The research was connected with a project ethically approved by the University of Turin (project: DANE\_RIC\_LOC\_15\_01).

<sup>6</sup> The article focuses on youth activism in political squats, and only some of these dimensions will be considered and even so only the activists who are under 40 years old (so to include the so-called "adult youth") and who are most involved in the activities of the squats.

Table 1. Cont.

		(d) Personal representations of political parties and political institutions
		(e) Personal symbols and ideological references
	1.3. Projected representations	(a) Social representations of the squat by neighborhood
		(b) Social representations of the squat by citizenship
		(c) Social representations of the squat by mass media
2. The group of the activists in the squat	2.1. Socio-demographic traits	(a) Dimension of the group
		(b) Age
		(c) Gender
		(d) Education
		(e) Job
	2.2. Shared attitudes	(a) Politics
		(b) Public institutions
		(c) Religion
		(d) Consumption
		(e) Clothing
		(f) Music and art
		(g) Language
		(h) Symbols and cultural references
		(i) General representations of contemporary society
	2.3. Drivers of conflict and cohesion	(a) Elements of identification and distinction
		(b) Shared activities outside of activism
		(c) Elements of internal cohesion
		(d) Elements of internal conflict
3. The squat	3.1. Patterns of intervention	(a) Aims
		(b) Issues
		(c) Activities
	3.2. Organization	(a) Organizational procedures
		(b) Decision-making strategies
		(c) Networks
		(d) Sectors of participants
	3.3. Squat's place and urban space	(a) Reasons for the occupation
		(b) Reasons for choice of the specific place
		(c) Distinctive traits of the place
		(d) Identity of the place
		(e) Urban public space and its rules

Subsequently three different perspectives of processing have been adopted conjointly. First, focusing on each category separately, the analysis has been oriented towards the individuation of different modalities with the aim of elaborating an internal typology as an instrument of systematization and synthesis. Second, reading the different categories with a transversal approach, the analysis has aimed at identifying possible emergent patterns of co-occurrence, and thus of

elaborating more general typical profiles. Third, focusing in particular on the ideological matrix of the different squats, the analysis attempted to observe whether a connection between profiles and matrixes could be found. The results of these analyses will be presented in the following sections.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Personal Paths and Meanings of Activism

Talking about individual paths of approaching participation, it is not easy to find among the young activists of the political squats well-defined profiles or more simply recurrent events. Due to the heterogeneity of the activities promoted by the squats, different individuals can intercept these places through different events and following different sensitivities.

On the whole, however, it seems that two different “drivers” of contact exist, at least on the basis of the young activists’ accounts. For some of them the socio-cultural dimension is the main one. Political squats, as will be shown later, are places which organize and host concerts, music nights, screenings, theatre shows, and as a consequence a lot of people get to know these places for the first time through these events. For other activists the path has been “political” since the beginning; in these cases public protests represent the first occasion of contact. In both cases friends and peers are relevant agencies of socialization, as sources of information and stimuli about political and cultural opportunities in the city.

From this point of view, in particular when the first meeting with the squat doesn’t occur in the early years of adolescence but a bit later, previous individual paths as well as personal sensitivities play a relevant role: People with previous experience of social or political engagement (even in political parties) often “meet the squat” during protest events or similar activities, whereas other people with weaker socio-political engagement often meet it through concerts or other socio-cultural activities. In both cases the reasons for participation can change in importance and become mixed over time, even if—either from the beginning or progressively—the political element is somehow transversally present for the activists, although differently declined.

Some relevant differences exist from this point of view on the basis of age. The interviewees older than thirty often had an adolescence marked—in their personal experience or through media representations—by the 1990s’ season of occupations, both in high schools and universities as well as squats in the city, and by narrations and events connected with the no-global movement and its great international happenings in the early 2000s; as a consequence, for a lot of them participation in political squats emerged through the availability of a wide range of opportunities for meeting and experimentation within this political and cultural milieu, which involved a large number of youth.

On the contrary, the twenty-year-old activists grew up in a less thriving context from this point of view, in which political squats were smaller in number as well as less interactive, and in which more local movements—such as the No Tav movement against high-speed railways—were common; as a consequence, the political squats’ milieu appeared more fragmented and more divided among some large and publicly visible squats, with a consolidated biography and identity and explicitly connected with local movements, and others which were less active and more isolated.

In both cases contact with the squat tends to occur through political, cultural or social drivers—even if this last element is maybe weaker for the youngsters—and through a more relevant impact of “horizontal” agencies of socialization (mainly peers, friends and schoolmates) than of “vertical” agencies (the school as an institution, obviously, but also the family, which represents a source of values and tastes but not of forms of engagement, and which is relevant also from this point of view only in some cases).

*When I was in the middle school I used to play in a punk band, something like that, then we began sharing records, [ . . . ] with a friend of mine, we had a distribution, of records first, and then of books. [ . . . ] When I was in the high school there was a publisher “of the movement”, I met them when there was an occupation at school [ . . . ] and I distributed their books. [ . . . ] Then I used to hang out in*



*occupied houses and then we occupied the house in \*\*\*, and also here I had a small distribution of records, books, by mail, stalls, something like that, and then this occupation . . . [ . . . ] the idea was to live there and have a place for distribution, to carry out activities. (I-18)*

*The beginning is also the main passage, in my opinion. [ . . . ] I started as a student of the school's collective, when there were still all the collectives in the schools; from the collective of the school I moved to the \*\*\* social center collective, [ . . . ] and from that time until now it has been a linear passage and crucial since the beginning, in the sense that political militancy begins on different levels than those nowadays but it begins inside a social movement, albeit a high-school students' movement. (I-17)*

*It's complicated . . . during my civil service I met a guy [ . . . ] who was a DJ in the radio of the squats' milieu, [ . . . ] I joined him during a broadcast, I went to the first radio festival of that period [ . . . ] and then from there . . . one thing leads to another, and it is as a potential energy which [ . . . ] when it finds the right push . . . all is automatic, you don't need to do or to say anything. When you discover that, in one way or another, you can choose a different life, from A to Z, in which there are no longer circumstances marking out your life path but [ . . . ] you understand that you can design a part of your life on your own, you can choose what to do. (I-7)*

Not surprisingly different motivations and meanings of activism are still present nowadays in the discourses of activists who have chosen—since the beginning or through a sequence of changes—different squats.

The political motivations, as mentioned above, are remarkably transversal, although differently declined by different activists and in different squats. The first main element is an explicit dissatisfaction and criticism of today's society on its various scales. In the eyes of activists, today's society is characterized by injustice, rooted in particular in social inequalities—and a consequent distribution of power—mainly connected with capitalism. One of the reasons for activism is thus acting against both the causes and the effects of this injustice, and in this perspective the political squat as organization rallies people who share this goal as well as strategies to gain it.

The second motivation for engagement is connected with the artistic and cultural dimension. As has been said, since their emergence, all the squats have organized not only protest events such as demonstrations and marches, but also cultural events such as concerts, dancehalls, cinema projection and stage shows. Obviously a great variety of clubs, cinemas and pubs have a similar offer; but three main differences exist: The cultural products proposed in the squats are aesthetically different from the mainstream ones, with different music styles, different movies, different theatre pieces; the messages and contents of these products are also different, being for the most part connected with a critique of the “dominant mainstream culture” and with the promotion of the issues and the sensitivities shared in the squats (which will be analyzed in the following sections); finally, also the social rules adopted in the squats during these public events are specific: Low prices, different (and somehow more informal and weaker) dress codes, different ways of personal interaction (e.g., macho forms of intersexual approach are strongly condemned), transgression of laws and dominant social rules concerning the consumption of alcohol and drugs. Some of the activists get in touch with their squat to participate in these activities, both as audience and as artists, due to the opportunities of experimentation that squats give.

The third motivation is explicitly connected with the “social” dimension of the squats, which have among their aims the building of social networks. From this point of view some activists appreciate in particular the presence in the squat of a dense, tightly-knit group of people characterized by sharing peculiar values, aims, tastes, styles and practices weakly diffused in the society as a whole; for others the squat is especially a place to meet an ever-changing set of people sharing a more fuzzy set of sensitivities and tastes.

Finally the fourth motivation, somehow connected with all the others, concerns the possibility through the squat of experiencing—“here and now”—alternative everyday practices and lifestyles. The squat, as a place and as a collectivity, supplies spaces, people, events, objects and languages

different from dominant mainstream ones, and allows—on a small scale—experimentation of another way of “being in this world”, in this society, while waiting and acting for its transformation.

*The first thing which attracted me absolutely was the cultural level, [ . . . ] the counter-culture, low-price concerts, the level of sociability; [ . . . ] the first approach is absolutely the cultural one, [ . . . ] the ability of making a non-assimilated culture, outside the market. (I-17)*

*One thing I feel, which is maybe more personal but which in my opinion has also political implications, is the real sharing of . . . I mean, the fact of feeling belonging to something wider. [ . . . ] I don't know, in the end, when I think what it means to be comrades or being part of this I think that [ . . . ] it means also putting your life in someone else's hands [ . . . ], a trust in other people which is really a glue. (I-21)*

*The squat is an instrument of transformation, [ . . . ] a good instrument to begin consolidating the first waves of movements and also to begin experimenting. [ . . . ] What we are trying to do now is an experimentation of what could be—abstractly in our ideas [ . . . ]—forms reproducible in society. (I-2)*

It is however necessary to point out that these different motivations very often co-exist in the individual interpretive frames of the activist, with a mix of hetero-oriented and auto-oriented perspectives. Moreover, in many cases it is not possible to identify a clear predominance of one of these meanings over the others: Complex and heterogeneous sets of meanings can be observed as the basis of activists' involvement in squat activities, as well as in their discourses and narrations on these issues, although the “political” element—with more or less strength—is, as previously mentioned, always present.

Obviously sometimes dialectic and conflict can emerge among these different components, but a reciprocal reinforcement tends more often to develop. Similarly the relative weight of each motivational component is not static but often changes over time, during the individual biographical paths of activism: In this sense in particular, the set of motivations at the base of the first “active” contact with the squat and the set of reasons for the subsequent maintenance of involvement in its activities can be significantly different. Not surprisingly then in some cases—although more rarely than in other forms of activism—it is also possible to observe periods of rarefaction, or even suspension, of individual participation, as well as of a shift from one squat to another (in particular inside the libertarian area; whereas any shift from a political area to another one is much more difficult, in particular on the relational level).<sup>7</sup> Any form of concomitant involvement in different squats is substantially absent, except for those participants who are more “peripheral” and less involved in the organization. Equally rare is the transition through, and co-participation in, associations of socio-political engagement other than squats: Despite the variety of groups of socio-political intervention nowadays in existence, political squats remain quite distinctive due to their political radicalism, their cultural alterity and the possibilities they offer of experimenting with different lifestyles; as a consequence, involvement in these contexts is rarely replaceable or compatible with other forms of activism.

### 3.2. The Group of the Activists

But who are the young activists of the political squats? It is really not easy and very risky to sketch a general portrait, and it is not easy to trace boundaries, since there is no formal belonging. Nevertheless some interesting prevalent traits can be underlined.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It is relevant to underline here that the reasons for these transitions from one squat to another can be very different, and connected with political disagreements, but also with relational problems among the activists, as well as with dissatisfaction with social and cultural sensitivities shared in the specific squat.

<sup>8</sup> Due to the aim of the article the following paragraphs will be dedicated to a portrait of the young activists. Two elements must however be highlighted from this point of view. First: The paper focuses on the nucleus of young activists, but a

The group of the most regularly involved activists in each squat seems to consist of 20–40 individuals in the Marxist area and 10–15 in the libertarian area. This difference is undoubtedly connected with the tendency, in the latter case, to occupy new squats more frequently, with consequent fragmentation into smaller groups; and this tendency depends on their political aim of extending the squatting practice but is also tied in with the idea that having over-large groups means not having the possibility of building true human relationships.

*I can't relate with one thousand people, sharing with them my everyday life without cages, norms, regulations and closed spaces. It is not human, we are made of flesh. (I-3)*

Considering the social position of the young activists, this trait has partially changed over time, and nowadays is variegated in the different squats. In the 1990s a lot of activists had graduated from, or were attending, secondary school, but lower educational levels were also common. Nowadays in several squats, in particular in the autonomous area, the presence of university students and of graduates is more evident and, due to the higher average age, the proportion of high-school students is lower. Significant changes have also occurred concerning the employment positions. In the past the Anarchist area was characterized by a high number of activists who had precarious, instable and part-time jobs “by choice”, as a form of resistance to a daily life organized too much on the basis of one’s working timetable; whereas the Marxist area had a significant number of activists involved in social-work jobs. Nowadays the presence of social workers is still notable but the more general tendency—often no longer by choice—is the growing number of temporary jobs and unemployment periods, in particular among the youngest activists. Overall the panorama of jobs is heterogeneous and precariousness, as among youth as a whole, is the most common characteristic.

The further elements to be considered concern cultural orientations and tastes.

As is to be expected, specific political sensitivities are strongly shared among the activists, but important differences exist among the different squats. In the autonomous area the connection with the non-institutional history of the Italian and international Communist movement are strongly evident, and the “autonomia operaia” of the 1970s as well as the 1977 movement are explicitly recognized as points of reference. In the Neo-Communist area the situation is more mixed, with the co-existence of Marxist and libertarian sensitivities, and with a more blurred reference to past movements. Only the Resistance movement of WWII is an explicit reference shared both by the autonomous and Neo-Communists.

The situation is quite different in the Anarchist area. Here there is quite widespread critical rejection of the Marxist and Communist perspective, in particular concerning the organizational dimension as well as varying political and cultural sensitivities in the different squats: Some of them are more connected with an insurrectionist approach, some with the Dadaist, Surrealist and Situationist experiences, others with the historical classical Anarchist tradition. In many cases the punk movement is also a relevant point of reference.

In both areas such ideological references are greatly fragmented and lack any systematic, consistent, collectively-shared frame.

Also with regard to the religious issue, the two areas are quite different. In the Communist area the Marxist critique of religion is widely supported, but a pragmatic approach to this subject is equally

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wider, difficult to estimate, number of participants and sympathizers exists and is more or less regularly involved in public activities and events. Second: during the 1990s most of the activists were young, between 16 and 25, although there were also some individuals in their 30s, who participated in the late-1970s movements, and usually had been key figures in the organization of the movement. Nowadays the presence of teenagers from the high-school movements is less evident, and most of the activists are in their 20s, although the presence of adults over 40 is often not insignificant: there is a sector of individuals who were young when they entered the squats but who are now in their 40s and 50s; moreover in recent years—in particular with the No Tav movement and the neighbourhood committees—political squats (in particular in the Marxist area) often attracted also adults. On the whole their composition is then from this point of view much more heterogeneous than in the past.

common. As a consequence, when the promotion of a protest requires collaboration with groups and individuals who have religious sensitivities (e.g., a part of the No Tav movement, or some immigrant Islamic or Pentecostal associations), this element isn't a great obstacle, and it is pragmatically accepted. On the contrary, the libertarian area is more explicitly atheist in its discourses and criticism and rejection of religion is more explicitly expressed. Moreover, even if criticism of the Catholic Church as an institution is shared by all the activists, different approaches are adopted: Some in the Anarchist area develop an intellectual and theoretical criticism of religious belief connected with the classical atheist approach evolving since the 1800s through various materialist philosophies, while others are more focused on a general criticism of religious institutions as forms of power, whereas in the Marxist area complaints about the consequences of the pressure of these institutions on decision-making centers prevail.

*Self-management, anti-militarism, anti-clericalism, and then all the aesthetic trends: Musically hard rock, punk core, and many others near these, experimentation, noise, industrial; on the cultural level Dadaism and Surrealism above all. I tell you . . . in general [the aim is to] expand the self-management experience as much as possible. [ . . . ] The aim is simply to avoid salaried work, to avoid the structure of the family, normal social structures, to avoid the necessity of having money, living on your own, [ . . . ] doing nothing of all the things you would have to do in a normal world. (I-3)*

*The paths developed by . . . the political, social, cultural and human heritage of the struggles in the 1970s . . . if an inspiration exists it is connected with these references because it is the closest with which you can compare. If you go farther there are all the experiences of the working class, from the Russian Revolution to, in Italy, the Resistance. (I-17)*

*We understand the use of the different theories of the revolutionary movements [ . . . ] not as a dead thing, as academic culture does, but as something living, [ . . . ] which can be used and reworked. [ . . . ] Surely the Situationist International is a relevant benchmark [ . . . ] because of its approach of studying also other streams, [ . . . ] there is not an ideological approach but a criticism of every ideology. [ . . . ] The Frankfurt School also said fundamental things, [ . . . ] and also, I don't know, the Italian Communist left said fundamental things, whereas I feel I am very distant from others. [ . . . ] There is a part of Anarchist thought, a part of Marxist thought, [ . . . ] however without adhering to one in particular. (I-18)*

*We don't have a precise political position, this is sure. We act in the domain of the personal, of individual ideas, [ . . . ] in the milieu of Anarchism and of libertarians. Very sui generis, without details, without a specific knowledge of studies, [ . . . ] in the generic sense of self-management of our lives, without aiming at a political perspective. [ . . . ] But we never said to ourselves exactly what we are, how we are. In this milieu we act [ . . . ], not wanting to settle for compromises with politicians, institutions. (I-7)*

In addition to politics and religion, other cultural sensitivities and practices are relevant shared distinctive elements in political squats. The first is the individual's aesthetic, in particular clothing style. In the autonomous area this style is quite homogeneous: Both for men and women the prevalent garments are blue jeans, t-shirts and hoodies; dark colors and in particular black hoodies are predominant, but not with a total-black style; political symbols and the name of the squat are often printed over the t-shirts and the hoodies. The Neo-Communist area is more heterogeneous, and a mix of inspirations from hippie, "ethnic", punk and skaters' styles can be observed; also in this case t-shirts and hoodies with the name of the squat and political symbols are common. Furthermore, in some cases the skinhead style is adopted in the Marxists area.

Also in the Anarchist area a relevant variety of styles can be observed; first of all the total-black style is widespread; moreover piercing, tattoos, metal accessories (in steel, not gold), and further elements recalling the rockabilly, punk and the post-industrial styles can often be seen. In other cases a sort of shabby, careless style is exhibited.

Considering then the choices of consumption from a wider perspective, the most relevant element remains music: As aforementioned, concerts have been one of the main activities in the political squats since their origins, and music has always represented an important element of collective identification and distinction. Nowadays music is still a core element, and significant peculiarities can be observed in the different sectors: Punk, noise and electronic are mainly played in the Anarchist area, whereas reggae and ska prevail in the Marxist one. Quite transversal to the different squats is so-called “trash music” (namely pop songs of the 1960s–1990s which nowadays sound strange and kitschy to young people), except maybe the libertarian ones, where criticism and rejection of mainstream music are particularly vibrant. It is also relevant to highlight that in the Marxist area a corpus of traditional political songs exists—connected with the Resistance as well as the 1960s–1970s movements—somehow shared as a communal heritage and a sign of the connection between past and present.

Finally a specific discourse must be developed about food. For a long time, although collective self-prepared dinners have been among the most common events in political squats, only in some of them was food a relevant issue, and in those cases vegetarianism and veganism, conceptually connected with animalism, were the fundamental elements, in particular in the Anarchist area, as fair trade was partly in the Neo-Communist squats. During the past decade, however, much more attention has been paid to this issue, with the consequent diffusion on the one hand of public activities such as purchasing groups, freegan practices, alternative food markets; and on the other hand with a parallel diffusion among activists of specific sensitivities about not only the characteristics of the products but also the processes of production and distribution, connected with explicit criticism first of all of intensive production, GMO, monopolistic seed cartels and big producers’ and suppliers’ chains. In this sense in several cases distinctive food practices progressively represented not only public issues of intervention but also relevant components in the activists’ lifestyles.

### *3.3. Collective Issues, Aims and Strategies*

In the previous pages the focus has been on the activists as individuals, but their representations, aims, and sensitivities must be inserted into a dialogue and taken into consideration also referring to the interpretive frames and forms of intervention collectively adopted in the group in which they are involved. From this point of view obviously there are significant differences between the different areas as well as the different squats. However, several transversal traits can be highlighted.

Three main issues emerge from this point of view: Anti-capitalism, anti-racism and anti-sexism. Anti-capitalism is the most general and comprehensive, directly connected with the criticism of today’s economic processes of production, distribution and consumption. Anti-racism is primarily declined in defense of the right of free circulation of people across national borders as well as with the denunciation of different forms of ethnic discrimination. Anti-sexism is mainly intended as a defense of women’s rights and a denunciation of different forms of male heterosexual domination as well as of discrimination against all other sexual orientations.

Connected with these three great drivers, further streams of intervention are then developed with different weights in the different areas.

The preservation of the environment and territory against the realization of large architectural works with a high impact on nature is substantially shared by all areas. However, among the autonomous activists it is mainly connected with the No Tav movement, whereas in the Anarchist area it is also closely connected with animal rights movements and alternative agriculture experiences.

A core issue in the Anarchist and Neo-Communist areas is the demand for freedom in using drugs—all drugs in the first case, marijuana and light drugs mainly in the second case—as well as for better education and information about these substances.

Specific to the Anarchist area is criticism of psychiatric structures and procedures—in particular mental institutions and psychopharmaceuticals—as well as of the conditions and the existence of the prison system. Both prisons and asylums are denounced as total institutions of social control. This issue

is not absent in the Marxist area, but it is more rarely explicitly posed as a core field of intervention, probably on the hypothesis that it does not represent an effective issue for gaining popular support.

“Internationalism” is a transversal issue, mainly understood as support to movements in conflict with national and international political and economic power groups active in other countries (in particular Palestine, Colombia, the Basque Country, Mexico, Kurdistan).

Considering all these different issues, it is easy to understand why political squats are often labeled, and often define themselves, as part of the “antagonist movement”: All their main goals and streams of intervention are oriented towards the elimination of some core traits of the current society and against several of its values and structures. But political squats, differently from other radical political groups, are also precisely characterized by “positive” goals, which can be summarized in the idea of the experimentation “here and now” of alternative lifestyles, inspired by sensitivities, tastes and values and made up of practices different from the mainstream or the dominant ones. And all these issues are explicitly connected by the young activists of the squats with two specific political ideologies: Communism and Anarchism, although the connections and the references to these ideologies present serious differences between the various areas.

In the autonomous area the ideological references are explicit and uniform: The general background is Communist thought, with specific sensitivity towards the Marxist, Leninist and Guevarist perspectives; the most specific benchmarks are the Italian Resistance movement of WWII and the 1970s extra-parliamentary movements, in particular the “autonomia operaia”. All these references are quite evident both in their contents and their aesthetics: Marx, Che Guevara, sometimes Lenin effigies, the red star and the hammer and sickle, as well as the words “Autonomia Contropotere” (Autonomy Counterpower) and more in general the color red are often adopted. Moreover the Aut. Op. acronym of “autonomia operaia”, and more recent icons such as the Anonymous mask, the No Tav movement symbols, feminist symbols, the red-and-black flags of the anti-Fascist movement, the helmet and the balaclava are also often visible.

Also in the Neo-Communist area Marxism and the Italian Resistance are relevant benchmarks, explicitly expressed through the color red, Che Guevara’s and the partisan Dante Di Nanni’s effigies, the fist icon, anti-Fascist flags and symbols, but on the whole the ideological and semiotic references are weaker. Moreover, in addition to these and more recent political symbols (such as the Molotov cocktail, the balaclavas and the feminist signs) two other symbols are used: The Rasta flag and the marijuana leaf, referring in particular to the anti-prohibitionist campaign which strongly characterizes this area.

The reconstruction of this sort of cultural and political references is much more complex when focusing on the Anarchist area. Here too some specific elements are quite common: The circle-A, the black flag (and more generally the color black), the skull and bones, the Jolly Roger. Moreover the flash in the circle, which as a matter of principle is the international symbol of the occupations’ movements, is much more used in the Anarchist area (significantly the autonomous occupations have adopted a partially modified symbol for several years, with the flash in the red star). And peculiar to this area are also the aesthetic *détournement* of mass culture icons and their heterodox assemblage to produce irritating and challenging works, and the hand-made writing and drawing style typical of the “do-it-yourself” punk fanzines. Even if other icons such as gas masks, Molotov cocktails and fire are sometimes adopted, symbols are in general less frequently visible in all the materials of the Anarchist area than in the Communist area, and only some of these symbols refer explicitly to political ideologies.

And a clear correspondence can be observed between these aesthetic tendencies and the wider perspectives of action of the different areas.

As aforementioned, all the activists of the occupazioni movement share a transversal criticism of capitalism, racism and sexism, and all these three elements are identified as characterizing traits of today’s society and understood as declinations of the same form of exercise of power by dominant sectors of society; in this sense also anti-Fascism and animalism represent further declination of the

same principles. Injustice and oppression are thus described as the two broadest critical distinctive features of this society.

Similarly, all the activists share the belief that institutional and totally legal forms of social, cultural and political intervention and participation cannot be effective instruments of social change. Two main alternative strategies are thus identified: On the one hand the experimentation and the diffusion of cultural styles and lifestyles characterized by practices and models alternative to today's dominant ones; on the other hand, the emergence, growth and diffusion of different forms and cleavages of protest, with the perspective of a general radical social conflict which leads to a crisis of the present institutions and structures of power. Squats and their activities represent in this sense the instruments for the promotion of these strategies.

Inside these general boundaries, however, different approaches characterize the different areas. Among the autonomous activists the main perspective is the promotion of protests as numerous, frequent and radical as possible. The model is that of the classical class conflict in a Marxist perspective, but projected in a process where the subjects involved in the protest are no longer mainly the working class but different sectors of the population protesting on the basis of the fact of being personally exposed to situations of exploitation and injustice or of being sensitive on behalf of other people exposed to these problems. All the other social and cultural collective activities have then two conjoined categories of aims which are always co-present: The promotion of alternative forms of sociability, with specific sensitivity towards the squat's neighborhood, as well as of alternative cultural events, products, messages and models; the channeling of the deriving social networks and cultural sensitivities in the organization of paths and events of public protest with the aim of a growing radical and widespread social conflict.

A partially similar approach can be observed in the libertarian area, and in particular in its so-called "insurrectionalist" sector, a minority, where again the main driver is the aim of a radical and diffused social conflict. In this case, however, an important difference can be observed: The relevance attributed to social activities and to aggregation through leisure events is weaker. The idea is that the aggregation of new activists, the diffusion of protests, cannot be achieved through these instruments but mainly through the development during protests of radical forms of conflict and the subsequent imitation of these modalities by other participants. At the moment in fact these participants share the same criticism of, rejection of and rage "against" the system—and can then potentially be mobilized—but still lack awareness of possible forms of action as well as of the presence of other people with their sensitivities. On the contrary, in the Neo-Communist area attention to social aggregation and socio-cultural activities is as strong as among the autonomous, as well as interaction with the neighborhood, but it is more explicitly intended as a goal in itself and less as a strategic element. Contact and interaction with different sectors of the population—in particular among the lower social strata—is thus often pursued through the adoption of cultural models and languages which are less distinctive and less explicitly politically connoted.

Finally, the approach among squatters is explicitly different. Production and dissemination of cultural products alternative to the mainstream as well as the experimentation of alternative lifestyles represent the most distinctive traits. The squat as a place represents first of all a physical space where alternative practices can be developed through the adoption of alternative social rules. The "bellavita" approach is significant, with the organization of collective dinners, musical evenings, movie projections and concerts where no money is accepted: All the artistic performances are free, all the food and drink are provided by participants, and a free-consumption approach is adopted. In addition to these activities, the squatters also organize street protests, or more distinctively street music parades, but their main perspective is rooted in the idea of the experimentation and the diffusion "through imitation" of alternative social and cultural practices and products. Not surprisingly then this is the area where artistic production and innovation is most widely cultivated; and it is also the area least oriented towards interaction with the population of the neighborhood of the squats as well as least open to

compromises in adapting its language and cultural offer to the sensitivity of wider potential publics to involve them in its activities and proposals.

### 3.4. *Forms of Intervention*

Bearing in mind the complex frames sketched in the previous pages, it is not surprising that the scene of public activities organized by political squats—to which some brief references have already been made—turns out to be considerably heterogeneous and variable over time, and that it is consequently not easy to present a comprehensive synthetic picture. Nevertheless some general sectors of activities can be sketched out, on the basis of their aims and the places where they are developed.

Focusing on activities outside the place of the squat, mainly in streets and squares, all of them have an, at least partial, communicative aim. Demonstrations and picket-lines are the main activities, together with protests on the occasion of public events organized by institutional or political actors. Pickets, distribution of flyers, marches, street musical parades, as well as riots, are all possible forms of action.

Another set of public activities is mainly conducted inside the squats' buildings. Live concerts and DJ sets, theatre and—more rarely—dance performances, film screenings, public debates and book launches, as well as collective dinners and—also in this case more rarely—sports events (such as boxing matches) and public festivals are the main indoor events, although some of them are also outdoors. Gyms, workshops and purchasing groups are more regular activities. Another set of core activities are informative, in particular the maintenance of websites and social networks pages as well as radio broadcasts.

It is easy to notice that all these activities are explicitly oriented mainly, although not only, to the “external” public, even if this orientation is stronger and more explicit in the Marxist area and more blurred among the Anarchists.

Another set of activities involves mainly the group of the activists. On the one hand there are those activities connected with the organization of public events. On the other hand there are semi-private dinners, hikes, and parties which are neither officially “private” nor publicly advertised, but in these situations only the presence of the most regular participants is genuinely welcomed.

On the whole, connecting all these different activities to the outline of aims and perspectives of intervention examined in the previous paragraphs, it is easy to observe that they have a mix of two different meanings: The first is connected with the aim of influencing political institutional decisions and involving a growing number of people in this action of pressure or—more rarely—of concretely intervening in specific problematic situations; the second is connected with the experimentation and diffusion of alternative lifestyles and cultural models, with the development of social and cultural activities perceived as different from dominant mainstream ones, and with subsequent building of collective identities through the concrete sharing of distinctive cultural products, events, rituals and practices.

And, not by chance, the organization of public mass protest events, as well as of socio-cultural activities aiming at the participation of a wider and more heterogeneous public, are more characteristic of the Communist than of the Anarchist area, which latter tends to prefer cultural activities characterized by strongly alternative aesthetic languages or more radical political events which can also be developed by a smaller number of participants.

In all these cases, a huge part of the activists' commitment is connected with the preparation and the organization of the different activities, and the organizational process in political squats is a very relevant and sensitive aspect. With the aim of highlighting the most interesting traits of this process, three main dimensions are particularly interesting: Decision-making, division of labor and hierarchies.

The core decisional and organizational instrument in each squat is the collective assembly of the activists: This is the place and the moment when future activities are defined, past activities are evaluated, aims and goals are discussed, roles and tasks are distributed. The fundamental process of distribution in particular is self-nomination, the willingness expressed by the individual to assume the



responsibility for a specific activity. The sensitive elements from this point of view are on two different levels. On the first level a general agreement must be reached about “what to do” and “how to do it”, and this usually means an attempt at unanimity: The “majority” principle, and more in general the voting procedure, are rejected. On the second level an equilibrium is required between the individual skills and preferences of those activists who are willing to deal with the single initiative, the collective preferences concerning the initiative, and the collective trust and judgment of the different activists.

The assembly is often explicitly presented by the activists as “participatory” and “horizontal”, a context where no hierarchy exists and where all the participants have the same importance. From this point of view the general consensus and the achievement of unanimity are often considered more relevant than the pragmatic achieving of practical aims in the organization, in particular in the libertarian area. As a consequence, assemblies can sometimes be very long, tiring and not very efficient in terms of a classical organizational perspective.

No formal hierarchy then exists in the squats: Very often it is explicitly stated these are “horizontal” contexts. Nevertheless, considerable differences of power and authoritativeness actually exist, on the basis of different elements: Experience, length of presence in the group, frequency of participation in the collective activities, rhetorical and dialogical abilities, charisma and previous relevant action are all significant factors in the development of different personal levels of influence over the assembly.

In any case the division of labor emerging from the single assembly must not be considered as lasting over time. No formal, stable division of roles exists in political squats. On the basis of personal skills, preferences and experiences, some predominance of each activist in some tasks instead of others can be observed, but no explicit role exists.

But why then should the less attractive tasks be carried out by single activists? Two different answers can be found: Sometimes the specific task is not attractive from some points of view but produces significant rewards from others (e.g., personal involvement in riots exposes one to the risk of legal problems but provides relevant social recognition and status among the group), at other times a personal sense of duty, and the importance attributed to the general project, are sufficient drivers for the acceptance of even the least inviting tasks.

Some difference however exists in this sense among the different squats: More specifically activists in the libertarian area tend to have a “less pragmatic” approach and a stronger exaltation and preservation of the horizontality of decisional processes and more in general of self-management principles, even if and when this has critical consequences for the efficacy of the organizational instruments. And this partial difference clearly emerges considering the networks of collaboration of the different squats: In the Marxist area protest events and campaigns are sometimes organized in a dialogue with extreme left-wing political parties and trade unions, civic society’s associations, as well as—in specific situations—local institutions, whereas in the libertarian area all these forms of interactions are absent and the networks are only constituted by other political squats—very rarely of Marxist inspiration—and other Anarchist groups.

*At \*\*\*1 we tried to have meetings, which were chaotic, and we took no decisions. In \*\*\*2 the assembly didn't even exist, because we always lived together, we were a family, every day, we lived very often in the kitchen, [ . . . ] a big room where there was also a stove with a fireplace, and if we had to talk about something we talked about it. Also there we had no method. [ . . . ] At \*\*\*\*3 and \*\*\*4 we had meetings, [ . . . ] age makes a difference, you use your head a bit more. At \*\*\*3 we had a weekly meeting, even if it is true that if you live together, have lunch and above all dinner, almost all dinners, you talk . . . but we had a meeting “of the house” . . . to understand the activities we had to do, who was going to organize them, how to do them, who was going to participate. [ . . . ] Obviously voting was . . . we never sank this low, I think it's really a very low method. (I-11)*

*On Tuesday there is an assembly, the general assembly of the \*\*, where political decisions are taken, but naturally also . . . we could say technical decisions. [ . . . ] There is a collective level, where collective means horizontality. [ . . . ] There is a hierarchy of priorities, of aims, and on the basis*

*of this, then, the appropriate decisions are taken. Naturally, you know, if some points remain unsolved or it takes a bit more time, if you don't finish it on Tuesday we keep on discussing it the next Tuesday or often we hold specific seminars, even only of self-improvement, about a relevant issue. (I-14)*

*The beautiful thing is that we always manage to eat together, because it is an opportunity for dialogue in which you talk with all the others, where ideas spread out. [ . . . ] While you are eating, you talk and discuss, and discussions emerge, but arguments . . . are always discussions for growth. We don't vote, there is no majority who decides, no, it must be unanimous, [ . . . ] because if I say that in my opinion we don't have to do that thing [ . . . ] we manage to understand the reason all together. Almost always [ . . . ], 99% of the time we decide together. (I-8)*

#### 4. Discussion

The portrait of the current relationship between youth, politics and participation sketched at the beginning of this article described young people who in most cases are not very interested in politics, have difficulty in positioning themselves on the left–right scale, as well as in finding a political party among the existent ones as a personal point of reference. They also express very low trust in the political system and in its institutions and actors, in particular political parties and politicians. As a logical consequence, they tend to be weakly involved in institutional forms of participation (the only exception being voting), and even if most of them express interest in issues of collective relevance, and are able to define socially relevant goals for politics, only a very narrow minority define themselves as politically engaged, although a wider sector is involved in various forms of social engagement, and a smaller but considerable sector is also involved in several forms of occasional non-institutional activities of political participation [1–6,9,24–38].

In this sense, for the aims of this article it is particularly interesting (and unexpected) that several of these traits also characterize young squat activists, but with a particular set of correspondences and differences.

First, young squat activists share with most of their peers the same distance from, and distrust in, institutional politics. Not only are political parties' and governments' positions and proposals constantly criticized, but at the same time politicians and parties are in general considered unable to develop effective proposals. A relevant difference, however, distinguishes young squat activists and their peers from this point of view: The latter have no trust in institutional politics mainly because of the limited scale of intervention of the parties and the tendency of politicians to act according to individual interests; the former lack trust mainly because they think that the institutional role of parties and politicians impedes any form of radical intervention which calls into question the basic principles and values of this society (such as capitalism, international political alliances, male domination).

Second, and consequently, both young squat activists and most of their peers are far from any form of institutional political participation, this being perceived at the same time as a waste of time because of the inefficacy of institutional political organization and as a form of action which is in danger of reinforcing groups which are not acting correctly for the common good. But for most youth this attitude leads to the lack of personal direct engagement in any form of activism, whereas in the case of squat activists (and more in general of socially and politically engaged young people) this same attitude tends to act as a driver towards the search for, and adoption of, alternative forms of active participation.

How can these different attitudes among young squat activists and their peers be interpreted? Three different points have to be considered, on the basis of the results previously presented, to find an answer.

First: Why are young activists of political squats engaged? The main point is that they have a critical perspective on today's society and conjointly they trust in the possibility of acting for its future change. Second: Why are these young activists politically engaged? Essentially because they think that this future social change is not obtainable only through social forms of engagement—such as those of social volunteering, which acts on the “effects” and not on the “causes”—but only through a change

of the political structures which govern society. Third: Why are they politically engaged in political squats? Because they think that effective political engagement must be declined in a collective and continuous path of intervention, and because they feel that these contexts allow the development of collective forms of intervention free from the limitations of institutional politics and potentially able to develop both efficient action—in the medium term—of external pressure on political decisional power centers, and—in the long term—of wider paths of radical social transformation. Young squat activists share with most of their peers a general disillusion with and disconnection from institutional politics, but do not translate this either into a general distance from politics or a general distance from direct participation, because they believe that new and different forms of political intervention can be effective intervening in specific critical problems and wider social change.

Undoubtedly these three coordinates allow us better to understand youth activism in the squats from a strictly political perspective. The point however is that this is not the same as understanding youth activism in squats as a whole. It has emerged clearly from research that young activists are involved in squats for a broader and more articulated set of motivations: Developing an intervention of social change, the possibility of producing and consuming a cultural offer which is alternative to the mainstream one, they find there networks of peers with whom they can build friendly relationships, and more in general because squats represent socio-spatial contexts where they can experiment and develop alternative ways of living. But two fundamental elements must be highlighted: These different individual meanings of participation, these different individual motivations, are co-present in the individual activists' frames and are perceived by the same activists neither as conflicting nor as independent, but as reciprocally reinforcing; the specific traits of social, cultural and political perspectives in squats' representations, narratives and forms of intervention are likewise interconnected. More specifically, even if the political perspective is always present (although, as mentioned before, differently declined in the different areas), in the young activists' narrations it is not possible to identify a general hierarchy among different meanings and activities: "Political" does not take precedence over "cultural" or "social"; the experimentation and diffusion of alternative social and cultural styles are both intended as goals and values in themselves and also as strategic actions for wider social change.

Obviously this does not mean that tensions and dialectical processes among these different orientations do not emerge. Of course they do. But this complex articulation of meanings and perspectives cannot be considered as an accessory or even avoidable trait, but is one of the intrinsic distinctive features of political squats and of youth activism in these contexts.

Youth activism in political squats is characterized by the same mix of self-satisfaction and attention to "the other", of auto- and hetero-orientation, as well as by the same high levels of flexibility and organizational elasticity, as several other current forms of juvenile participation [3,5,6,24,26,31].<sup>9</sup> Our research clearly shows this mix, considering not only individual motivations but also collective activities and organizational processes: The proposal of a venture, its characteristics, the division of tasks and roles, have come out as the result of the interplay between collective aims and forms of action with individual sensitivities and preferences, without any hierarchical imposition or any stabilized, formal definition. And it is very relevant that this horizontality and fluidity have explicitly and constantly been underlined and remarked in the activists' accounts as fundamental principles of reference.

But this form of activism has also emerged as significantly different from all other forms of youth engagement on the basis of the mix of radicalism and otherness which characterizes it. "Otherness" because the values, the aims, the forms of collective action, the cultural preferences, the rituals and the practices developed by these activists are very different from the most widespread both in the mass media and in the population as a whole. "Radicalism" because the relationship between these

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<sup>9</sup> Nowadays similar traits can also be observed in a growing range of forms of religious participation [93].

elements and the mainstream is in most cases marked not only by alterity but also by explicit rejection and antagonism, both in their contents and in the ways they are promoted and lived by the activists. And this otherness and this radicalism—which for the activists are not only fundamental drivers of engagement but also core traits of mutual recognition and of distinction from the “other young people”—are immediately observable, as previously described, in their collective representations and narrations of society, in their definition of values and goals, in their elaboration of the strategies of organization and intervention and in their distinctive everyday practices. Aims, forms of action, organizational processes, social and cultural collective activities, as well as specific individual practices, clearly express—more or less consciously—this otherness and radicalism, which thus emerge as the key to interpreting and holding together all these different elements and the specific meaning the young activists attribute to them. On the whole, youth activism in political squats is then interpretable as a specific form of youth lifestyle—lifestyle being defined as “a set of practices, with unitary sense and relational meaning, which is a distinctive model shared within a collectivity, without having either a pre-existent cognitive-axiological system or a pre-determined socio-structural condition as generative elements” [94] (p. 177).

The fundamental practices of this lifestyle are both the collective activities officially organized by the squats for the external public (such as protests, concerts, information, collective dinners), the internal activities (in particular those connected with the organizational processes), and the more informal habits and customs shared by the young activists (concerning clothing, food, cultural consumption, and language).

The meanings of these practices are complex and differentiated, and emerge from the intersection between the interpretations given by each activist, the motivations they advance as the basis of their activities, and the interpretive frames collectively shared in the group of the activists. And in this sense, considering individual motivation and collective aims, it is clearly emerged that the political dimension of these processes of signification is relevant but it is always mixed with other social and cultural components.

The sense of this lifestyle is rooted in the radicalism and the otherness which describe the general orientation of the young activists towards the criticism and rejection of the dominant traits of today's society, the experimentation of alternative cultural models, and the diffusion of these models in the society both through the diffusion of distinctive practices and the development of wider conflictual processes of social change.

The definition of lifestyle adopted here states that these sets of practices do not have either a pre-existent cognitive-axiological system or a pre-determined socio-structural condition as generative elements [94] (p. 177). A lot of youth cultures are nowadays characterized by this weak influence of values, representations and narratives, as well as of cultural models and different forms of capital deriving from social positioning [95]. And, as is known, for several years research literature has underlined that also in many forms of social and political youth engagement ideologies, great narrations and values are weaker and weaker as collectively shared elements, and their social position is often only a very partial explicative factor [94] (Chapter 7).

The impact of social position, as emerged in the previous analyses, is little relevant in explaining young squat activists' representations, attitudes and choices: The point is not that these elements have no influence, but that this influence is not sufficient for the comprehension of this phenomenon and its distinctive traits.

But the situation is very different when one considers the cognitive and axiological elements—ideologies and values, narrations about “how society is”, “how society should be” and how change could be effected—because these references are relevant elements in the orientation of collective action and in the development of collective identities in political squats. However, these factors play their role in a highly specific way, very different from what happened in past political activism. Most of the squats' young activists have little knowledge of the doctrines evoked by the images, symbols and keywords which they listen to and sing about in their songs of reference, which they wear on their

t-shirts and paint on their squats' walls or post on Facebook pages. Narrations and representations about contemporary society, values, aims and strategies, are often consciously adopted, and collective debates are sometimes developed around them. But these different elements are not generally inserted in wider and systematic shared frames, and the collective discussion of these issues is not among the main, distinctive activities in this form of activism. Moreover, other elements such as cultural tastes and practices, as well as social rituals, are equally—or sometimes even more strongly—perceived as fundamental traits of collective identification and distinction, even if their connections with those more general narrations, values and aims are not easily explainable.

As a consequence, these cognitive and axiological elements cannot be considered “generative elements” of the shared practices because of this fragmented, unsystematized and unhomogeneous presence in the activists' and in the squats' frames, as well as because different existential, social and cultural—not only political—elements can be relevant drivers and motivations, meanings, at the basis of these lifestyles, to the point that, as has been highlighted, youth activists can even leave their squat for non-political reasons but due to their dissatisfaction with the shortfall of existential, experiential, social and cultural resources and opportunities that the place and the group provide them.

Youth activism in political squats can thus be interpreted as a real lifestyle, in which both individual practices and collective activities are constitutive elements, and in which the dimension of political intervention is present and fundamental, but represents only one component of wider and complex frames of meaning. This form of activism, because of its distinctive traits, forces then researchers nowadays to mix their conceptual instruments and boundaries in their analysis and to adopt new and different interpretative lenses through which tastes and values, ideological references and structured doctrines, cultural and political practices, auto- and hetero-orientations, the development “here and now” of alternative lifestyles and cultural models and the general radical transformation of society and its structures, are no longer acceptable as dichotomies, as mutually exclusive elements, but must be interpreted—as by young political squat activists—as co-existent components of complex lifestyles in activism.

In this perspective it would be interesting to check in the future whether this interpretative perspective is applicable more widely to contemporary youth activism, developing more specifically comparative analyses between youth activism in political squats and other forms of socio-political engagement. Further research should focus on distinctive practices and interpretive frames adopted by the activists, whereas most works nowadays either adopt quantitative approaches, and pay little attention to individual frames of meaning, or, adopting a qualitative methodology, focus on a single form of activism, thus allowing only very generic, approximate comparisons. Both quantitative and qualitative research into these issues still today tend to exhibit insufficient tools for studying the interpretative frames of young activists. Future works would benefit from explicit methodological reflection about potential strategies for analyzing these issue.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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