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Critical capacity and community engagement. The Janus face of Renewable Energy Communities

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1. *Introduction*

Coordinated market economies have been facing growing difficulties in reconciling economic dynamism with social cohesion, whereas liberal market economies have been dealing with new obstacles in combining economic innovation with upward mobility (Crouch 2011; Streeck, Thelen 2005; Hall, Soskice 2001; Trigilia 2022). Besides, novel economic practices boosting participation, social inclusion, economic well-being and bonds of reciprocity have been emerging at different scales and in various institutional contexts both *within* and *in opposition to* capitalist economies. These are organized experiences for the production and/or distribution of goods and services in more or less explicit opposition/alternatives to the capitalistic system, considered both as non-sustainable from the ecological perspective and socially unfair. We will refer to them as «Radically Alternatives Diverse Economies» (RADEAs from now on). Anti-capitalism in its various forms (smashing capitalism, dismantling capitalism, taming capitalism, resisting capitalism and escaping capitalism) is the symbolic, practical and organizational code of these practices (Wright 2019; 2020). From the empirical viewpoint, RADEAs nurture different kinds of experiments: alternative food networks, complementary currencies, energy communities, intentional communities, recovered enterprises/workers buyout, collective management of land and platform cooperativism are some of the most well-known examples (see Barbera, Negri, Salento 2018; Monticelli 2022; Wright 2020).

Among these, Renewable Energy Communities (RECs from now on) are forms of locally organized RADEAs in which ter-

ritorial communities experience a certain degree of ownership/control on energy production and consumption and enjoy collective benefits from this[1]. A REC is a network of consumers and producers organized as a legal entity with the aim to produce and exchange electricity in a territory delimited by the belonging to the same primary high voltage substations. RECs are cases in point of the co-called «direct social action» (Bosi, Zamponi 2015) that aim at the partial de-commodification of energy production and consumption. In doing this, they operate within a given organizational field and they have to deal with market forces and institutional rules. Also due to institutional and market pressures, differences in the genesis and the diffusion of energy communities in European countries are conspicuous. In some of them, such as Germany, a great proliferation took place in recent years (Romero-Rubio *et al.* 2015); in others, such as Italy, experiences have been more limited and they struggle to take off by extricating themselves within the regulations of the electricity market. On the Italian case, the National Recovery and Resilience Plan allocates 2.2 billion of euros for the promotion of energy communities in municipalities with fewer than five thousand inhabitants, to relaunch their development and mitigate situations of economic vulnerability. According to the 2022 quarterly Energy and Climate report, in Italy there were 46 collective self-consumption configurations and 21 renewable energy communities. The estimate of the Enea Observatory (June 2023) states that in Italy there are approximately 54 self-consumption communities active – 17 RECs and 37 collective self-consumption groups – and almost a hundred have requested recognition. The sociological interest for these small-scale experiments lies in their being «seeds for a good Anthropocene» (McPhearson *et al.* 2021), based on five key principles: rethinking growth, rethinking efficiency, rethinking the state, rethinking the commons, and rethinking justice. The purpose of RECs is to support citizens' participation and control over decision-making in renewable energy at local level, while being a tool for *energy justice* that shapes a new form to the energy-society connection (Standal *et al.* 2023).

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[1] Energy is part of the so-called «foundational economy» (Foundational Economy Collective 2019; Dagnes, Salento 2022). It is a foundational good for our daily routines, production processes and civilized life. Throughout human evolution, the different forms of the man/energy relationship have been associated with phase transitions in the socio-political organization of the economy, as well as in the social and political fabric of society.

On this general background, the key aim of this paper is to assess the role played by the critical capacity to shape a new paradigm of common resource management within the energy sector. To this end, we endeavor to discern empirically the interplay between the energy community as an *expressive* device that feed the social fabric of the local community and the organizational dimension of the REC as an effectively operating transformative force. In other words, we do not take for granted the «alternativeness» of RECs to assess it empirically and with the aim of sound research design. To this end, our argument is organized as follows. In par. 2 and 3 we shall outline the theoretical framework and the research questions, centered on the topics of critical capacity. In par. 4 we shall illustrate the research design and how we got access to the field, while in par. 5, 5.1. and 5.2 we shall illustrate the empirical findings and link them to the theoretical framework. In the conclusions (par. 6), the key results shall be summarized and some general remarks to connect RADEAs experiments to the broader issue of *place-based politics* will be developed.

2. *Assessing the critical capacity in action*

RADEAs share a family resemblance with concepts such as sustainable community movements and organizations (Forno, Graziano 2014), neo-materialist movements (Schlosberg, Coles 2016), alternative food networks (Corsi *et al.* 2018), direct social action (Bosi, Zamponi 2015) and new forms of prefigurative politics (Monticelli 2021). RADEAs have spurred scholarly interest in local development, sustainability, active citizenship, participation, alternative futures, renewal of democracy and post-capitalism (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, Healy 2013). They can be framed as new forms of collective action that do not just rely on the «usual» repertoires of protest, but focus on material practices, production/distribution of essential goods and services and utopian aims (Monticelli 2022). Thus, they are not «just» social movements, but new forms of production, consumption and distribution of goods and services. At the same time, they are not «just» forms of production, consumption and distribution of goods and services, for they try to build novel economic practices that realize their own «anti-capitalistic» mobilization

aims. This *hybrid nature* makes them of specific interest for a sociological analysis at the intersection of economy, politics, environment and society.

This analytical interest, nonetheless, takes two quite different ways. In the first one, RADEAs are often described in terms of a wide variety of *positive* properties and qualities, such as participation, sustainability, democracy of social and economic relations, re-embedding of the economy, and so on. They are *by default* classified as «real utopias» of practical kind, distinct and different from «abstract utopias» (Wright 2020). They are depicted as niches of radical social innovation based on trust, more equal and fairer relationships among producers and con-sumers, as well as on a more environmentally friendly and (glo) local mode of production and distribution of essential goods and services to fulfill people's basic needs. Assuming that they are built on positive-sum games between labor and capital, as well as between the economy and the environment, they are supposed to enhance human capabilities to flourish in connection to the values of equality, freedom, and solidarity.

Despite the intrinsic interest from a «public and progressive sociology» viewpoint (for an overview, see Monticelli 2022), we maintain that the previous arguments have significant shortcomings, and here is where the second perspective on RADEAs becomes key. First of all, the «public and progressive» perspective lacks a proper balance between the *social* and the *sociological* interest for RADEAs. Secondly, and relatedly, we maintain that it often lacks a challenging propositional theory of the invoked critical capacity, privileging instead the building of quite abstract concep-tual apparatus. Thirdly, when it deals with empirical research it often analyzes RADEAs as «just-so-stories» to build a charming narrative on anti-capitalism. This enables a naive perspective on social change that downplays the role of both institutional op-portunities/constraints and individual/collective agency. Our paper addresses these shortcomings, providing an empirically grounded account of REC as a case in point of RADEAs, supported by a theoretical fine-grained assessment of the social change in con-nection to the role of both institutional context and agents of change. The «critical capacity in action», in this way, become a research question to be assessed empirically and in relation to a sound analytical framework (Boltanski, Thévenot 1999).

To this end, the paper is organized as follows. First, we will focus on how the critical capacity emerges and concretely works (par. 3). Here we will analyze the interconnection between the critical capacity and the broader institutional field in which social change occurs. This posture is crucial to avoid a crypto-functionalist trap fed by *ad hoc* narratives supported by a simplistic image of social change. As Mark Granovetter (2017) noted, crypto-functionalism tends to «explain» a given phenomenon as the evolutionary outcome of solving a specific problem of adaptation as a whole. On the contrary, we assume that RADEAs are extremely heterogeneous experiences that differ widely both internally and over space and time. Crypto-functionalist narratives fail to take this variability into account (Grabher, Stark 1997; Granovetter 2017). We will thus consider RADEAs as internally stratified and far from being homogenous entities. In this line, we will illustrate how the *critical capacity in action* works and connects to the political and social dimensions of the local society.

3. RADEAs as change agents

The first analytical focus is on how *agents of change* realize that something is going wrong, that it cannot continue in the same way and that change is therefore necessary (Boltanski, Thévenot 1999). What are the «critical moments» of RADEAs genesis? We argue – in line with Arjun Appadurai (2013)[2] – that the critical capacity emerges from the intentional and organized performative interactions that lead to situating immediate and mundane problems in a map of aspirations capable of linking *material* aspects of life (experience-near) to more *general* cultural conceptions of the good life (experience-distant). Therefore, regardless of the

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[2] At the micro level, the constitutive elements of RADEAs make possible a joint commitment to emerge (Gilbert 1996). A joint commitment is the reciprocal pact or promise between individuals within a plural subject, a «we», of which the single individuals are the parts (Tomasello 2009). The plural subject thus emerges from a mutual promise for a shared future. When we promise to ride our bikes to the park together, we place the mutual promise as antecedent to a state of the world to be achieved (and enjoyed) together. Similarly, when a collective of workers commits to writing an industrial plan – or when the inhabitants of a village act together to build an energy community – they fulfil a mutual promise oriented towards the realization of a future state of the world (see Barbera 2023).

results they may or may not achieve, such organized performative interactions broaden and thicken the aspirational map, recover the anchorage to the future and strengthen the capacity for collective voice. The aspirations map becomes a tool for navigating the future in a given social space: the present self it connects (prefigures, imagines, conjectures) to the possible future selves in potential future states of a different world. It thus identifies possible purposes and roles toward which intentionally heads. Such purposes and roles refer back to the overall social organization and to broader principles of social justice.

In this line, we would argue that RADEAs are «mobilizing assemblages» that fuel the social construction of the critical capacity in action. This is a crucial point in our argument: the critical capacity of change agents is not built by invoking moral values *as such*, but by the rather upstream building of «assemblages»[3], the outcome of which could be the downstream condensation of shared values, collective identities and organizational roles and rules. Accordingly, the hypothesis that we will explore in the fieldwork is that RADEAs emerge from those interaction regimes capable of mobilizing change agents around social practices whose effect consist in the sedimentation of shared meanings, values and roles/rules.

Along with being endowed with face-to-face interaction opportunities and socio-technical assemblages, RADEAs require a third analytical element: moral entrepreneurship. According to Becker, moral entrepreneurs are those who say that the outcome of the last crusade has not been satisfactory or that the gains *once made* have been whittled away and lost (Becker 1963). We will here rely on the analysis of Christopher Powell (2014), who summed up Becker's work and created a broader definition of a moral entrepreneur as: «a person who tries to persuade and influence a group to keep, alter, or discard a set of beliefs or norms. Regarding Becker's original work though, it is important to make note that Becker concluded that there were two types of moral entrepreneurs, those that are rule creators and those that are rule enforcers» (p. 2). A moral entrepreneur is a change agent who has the skill and power to stimulate, facilitate, and coordinate the change efforts[4]. Even if the implementation of

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[3] Latour 2007.
[4] Lunenburg 2010.

rule-making and rule-enforcing mechanisms is key, moral entre-
preneurs *à la* Becker do not limit themselves to innovation in
the rules of the game They change the game itself. They help to
organize and establish new (and/or latent) moral *goals* endowed
with practical consequences.

In the genesis of RADEAs moral entrepreneurs are guided
by the aim to address «wicked problems», namely problems
that resist solutions (Alford, Head 2017) and that involve com-
plex, multidimensional challenges on different scales and levels.
Accordingly, solving these problems is not conceivable through
a technocratic, top-down approach, but calls for building con-
sensus, trust and legitimacy to innovate in conditions of radical
uncertainty[5]. Change agents encourage ground-level initiative by
building the conditions to innovate, then converting the solutions
that emerged from the decision-making process into general
standards. They enable ground-level participation to ensure that
solutions and standards are bend to local needs in a *place-based*
way (Barca 2019). Moral entrepreneurs are not – or not only
– economic entrepreneurs, but change agents whose concerns
encompass social justice and collective welfare. They are «pro-
methean innovators» who strive to achieve new moral equilibria
by hybridizing different resources and rules of action to bear
on unsatisfied needs (Barbera, Parisi 2019). As Prometheus, who
brought the flame of knowledge from the Gods to men, they
are able to pre-figure a different future.[6]

4. *Research design*

How the critical capacity *in action* emerged and worked in
the case of Gagliano Aterno REC? Living in Gagliano for five

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[5] Precisely because of the scope and complexity of the issues they involve, wicked
problems are regularly associated with dramatic, transformative solutions, with little
attention paid to «incremental experimentalism» which proved successful in many in-
stances (Sabel and Victor, 2022). Accordingly, wicked problems encourage approaches
and assessments where an initiative is either a complete success or entirely unsuccessful,
without considering incremental improvements and small wins as indicators of the action's
effectiveness. The kind of incremental experimentalism that characterizes change agents
works by acknowledging up front the likelihood of false starts and overreach, given the
fact that the best course of action is unknowable at the outset.

[6] Prometheus (Προμηθεύς) is, literally, the «prescient» *pro-manthanei* unlike is brother
Epimetheus, «the one who reflects late».

months[7] (from June to November 2022) enabled us to employ various tools for an in-depth analysis, elucidating the intricacies of the territory and the numerous challenges inherent both in the genesis and in the working of the REC.

We relied on various methods to fulfil the research aims. The first one is the social interaction study's main technique (Cardano 2011), namely participant observation. Through this technique, we managed to see events unfolding within their «natural» setting. Sociologists and anthropologists who were part of the «Montagne in Movimento» project (MIM from now on) have been our key informants and gate-keepers. They greatly helped our access to the field, since they had already established themselves as part of Gagliano daily-life back in 2021. They entered the daily routine of the local people helping them in fulfilling their basic needs, and they have been deeply involved in the expressive socialization moments of the community: going to the supermarket, going to the doctor/hospital, helping with territorial mobility and being part of the social events. As a result, the community had already been accustomed to the researcher's «familiar» presence in the village. This previous awareness greatly helped in the establishment of trust between us and the local community for the whole field. We took daily field notes to make sure that the observations and information were as much as possible detailed and fine-grained. These field notes served both as a reflection on the experience, as well as a necessary aid for memory preservation. Moreover, the involvement in the MIM project via the NEO's school (Nuove Esperienze Ospitali) established in Gagliano helped us to observe the unfolding of a number of initiatives that provided us with key information and first-hand knowledge. The two main initiatives were the assemblies and the REC helpdesk. During the fieldwork, we attended three assemblies in which we were actively involved and participated in the community discussion about the REC. The first gathering was the inauguration of the NEO's school, one

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[7] Lavinia Damaschin lived in Gagliano for six months, while Filippo Barbera spent there few weeks all over the past two years to teach at the experimental training programme «NEO – Nuove Esperienze Ospitali». Moreover, Filippo Barbera has been the scientific coordinator of a video-report about Gagliano and its REC, founded by Cariplo Foundation, that gave access to further information (see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6LC8oCZ_FE). Notwithstanding this division of labor, we will always use the pronoun «we» with reference to the research.

of the MIM's projects, during which we assessed the inhabitants' attitudes towards the research team. In the second assembly, which focused on the public presentation of the REC, we had the opportunity to dig deeper into the levels of involvement, the public dynamics of group interactions, the making of local leadership and the vocabulary of motives displayed when talking about REC. Finally, the last meeting centered the discussion on the connection between citizens and local institutions for the working of the REC. The second initiative, known as the REC helpdesk, lasted for three months, from August to October 2022. The idea of the initiative started from the bottom-up in response to a Gaglianese community specific request. The main goal of the initiative was to enhance awareness and increase knowledge regarding community participation and with regard to the link between individual needs and collective solutions. The initiative was key to observe the level of engagement and public justifications related to the making of the community-energy link.

Additionally, we relied on Park's trick (Cardano, Gariglio, 2022) to investigate the «marginal men» viewpoint, focusing on the opinions of those who *do not* actively participate in the REC project. Throughout a door-to-door conversation that took place twice a week along the whole field, we tried to stimulate dialogues about energy, community and place-based innovation. By asking questions to the marginal people of the local community, we aimed to get an overall view of the impressions and feelings of the village's inhabitants taking into account the *marginal voices* of a *marginal place*. We also conducted six in-depth interviews: three with active participants in the REC program and three with non-participants. The interviews were crucial for understanding different perspectives on the REC and avoiding to adopt a-critically the viewpoint of the core agents of change. It is worth to point out that the data analysis has been carried out recursively throughout the field, following the making of a «reflective report» *in situ*.

5. *After the earthquake*

Gagliano Aterno is a mountainous tiny village with a population of 236 residents, nestled within the Sirente-Velino Regional Natural Park in the Subequana Valley of the Abruzzo region.

The village is classified as an Inner Area, defined by the National Strategies of Inner Areas (SNAI) as territories distant from the pole municipalities, with a high presence of natural resources and very diversified because of the different processes of anthropization. These territories are characterized by the lack of vital public amenities, such as educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and railway transportation (see Servillo *et al.* 2016). As many of these inner areas tiny villages, Gagliano Aterno has a small bar which is the heart of the local social life, where card tournaments, exhibitions and public assemblies are organized. Due to its marginality, the mayor of Gagliano defines this area as «the Inner Area of the Inner Areas» in connection to its geographical remoteness, severe service deficiencies, and the earthquake-induced damages endured. In 2009, the village of Gagliano Aterno was struck by an earthquake. Even though 13 years have elapsed since that event, the physical reconstruction of the buildings only began two years ago. A significant number of houses still stand vacant and in a state of disrepair, posing challenges to the habitability of the area. Consequently, many individuals have been compelled to relocate to different places.

The previous basic description is enough to classify Gagliano Aterno as place about to undergo an inexorable decline. It has progressively slipped into marginalization, and depopulation has inflicted substantial harm upon the locality, resulting in the closure of nearly all businesses and essential services for the community. Additionally, the earthquake forced the displacement of numerous residents, prompting them to seek new residences elsewhere. The future prospects for Gagliano appeared predetermined, also because no institution or policy seems to be interested in changing something. It is a recurrent issue for marginalized places: «For years, these places have suffered from policies which have responded to interests and logic far from the well-being of its inhabitants» (Cersosimo, Donzelli 2020).

In 2020, there was a remarkable reversal of the circumstances. The reactivation of the territory stemmed from the recognition of the necessity of «doing something» for Gagliano when the central and regional institutions were absent. This was the «critical moment» where the critical capacity started to emerge. Two key actors have been mobilized in this endeavor in the role of moral entrepreneurs: the local administration, thanks to the election of a young new mayor and the founders of the «La Stanzetta»

group[8]. «La Stanzetta» served as the physical interaction setting where the critical capacity emerged. This is where the value of Gagliano's re-birth was first generated and where it became the symbol of the collective belonging. The «La Stanzetta» group was later on joined by the researchers involved in the «Montagne in Movimento (MIM)» team.

The election of the new mayor and the connection between him, the «La Stanzetta» group and the research-action project MIM was then the *critical moment* (Boltanski, Thevénot 1999) where people understood and shared the feeling that something was wrong and that they needed some kind of change. Precisely, as previously illustrated, the *critical capacity* represents the acknowledgement that something is awry, that the current state of affairs is unsustainable, and that a profound change is unavoidable. Boltanski and Thevénot posit that in the course of recognizing the emergence of an issue, it becomes imperative to adopt a reflective stance, deliberately distancing oneself from the current moment, and redirecting one's attention toward the past as a resource for a different future. In this connection, Gagliano's major reminisces were about the once upon vibrant presence of amenities including a restaurant, a pharmacy, a grocery store, an oven, a paint shop, and an array of other establishments. Gagliano used to have seven butchers and «all the people from the Valley were coming here to but their food», as we were told. The loss of these key daily essentials constitutes a shared cultural vocabulary among the residents of Gagliano. This prompted the Mayor to embark on an initiative aimed at cultivating this *sense of emptiness* and lack into a shared cultural language focused on re-building the foundational economy of the place as the key building block for a new livability. The access to energy and the REC were identified as the concrete starting point for this process. In an abandoned place, the abundant and widespread resource of the sun became the «last resort resource» to revitalize the community. As we will see, this is also rooted in the common-pool management habits of the local community.

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[8] The «small room», an initially occupied physical space that later evolved into a cultural association within Gagliano Aterno. The relevance of this physical space is still alive in the collective memory of the inhabitants, as the documentary shows (see around minute two: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6LC8oCZ_FE).

The next step was the formal birth of the REC as the result of the collaboration between the administration and the research-action project. On the one hand, the administration proposes itself as the formal coordinator of the project and bought the first solar panels for the community, through a private call for proposals. On the other hand, the social researchers worked with the local population to raise their awareness about climate change. This was the Gagliano's organizational field (Powell, Di Maggio 2012), which helps to see the REC not only as a system of new rules but also as system of novel relationships. The process unfolded through assemblies, activities, cultural gatherings and festivals embedded in the daily life of the community. As one interviewed said to us: «Here in Gagliano we talk about energy at the bar and during the town festival». Festivals and cultural events are means to community building and foundational infrastructure (Tomaney *et al.* 2023), connecting the feeling of «belonging» to a place to its shared future (Barbera 2023). Accordingly, the making of the REC was deeply intertwined with expressive socialization routines and daily life habits of the people.

5.1. *People's energy*

We will now illustrate the vocabulary of motives and the mobilization repertoires that emerged during the fieldwork. Gagliano Aterno's REC critical capacity appears at first sight very cutting-edge: unlike other cases where energy is considered mainly if not only as «bills and costs», the public framing of the topic in Gagliano focused on energy as an essential good to keep the local community *alive*. Energy became a necessity whose value must be properly appropriated by the local community. In this way, energy became an asset that needs to be collectively managed and properly allocated. This would make people adjust their lifestyles by organizing their daily routines depending on the availability of renewable energy sources. This «reversal» is key: in centralized energy systems, life-styles are rigid and the seemingly endless availability of energy finds its limit just in the cost of bill. Here we see a key U-turn: life-styles adapt to the new system of *scarce* resources by a rescheduling of daily activities, energy saving tricks and the adoption of green practices.

Individual life-styles thus became something to adapt, change and bend in connection to the energy system functioning.

A second key shift is the topic of *control* and *sovereignty*[9]. Mostly energy-producing systems are highly centralized and out of people's control. REC, on the contrary, are focused on the localization of the energy production processes. This means promoting renewable energy sources at the local level and encouraging decentralized production and local control. In this way, the emphasis moves away from the issue of individual consumption to the environmentally friendly and collective strategy to promote the voice and power of people on a key foundational asset. In this regard, reasserting local territorial control can be a means of taking populist concerns as a radically different form of territorial empowerment associated with the everyday practices of ordinary people. On the other hand, the same focus on control and sovereignty on the foundational assets in places where ordinary people feel deprived of political power may support closure and nativism as well. We will return on this key ambivalence in the conclusive remarks.

All in all, the REC proposes a shared governance of the energy as a common good through people's co-ownership and public deliberation over the surplus generated. Within this system, participants in the REC are interconnected through electrical substations, social relationships, property rights and common set of standards and protocols (Arrobbio, Sciullo, 2020). As already noted, Gagliano's REC initiative was born in a context where the critical awareness on marginality, both spatial and institutional, has generated a window of opportunity for the collective agency and moral entrepreneurship. Namely, a space for the renewal of the collective «capacity to aspire» to a different future in discontinuity with the present state-of-affairs. In this connection, the Gagliano's REC is a case in point where the critical capacity for a «better future» translated into organizational solutions and productive technologies. Real utopias, as we previously underscored, need to become *praxis* without being *lost in translation*. Key to this were the distributed agency of the moral entrepreneurs, who fostered the critical capacity that helped local people to create new aspiration maps, to combat fatalism, and to re-create «hopescapes» for a new daily-life in Gagliano.

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[9] See Gerbaudo 2021.

These new «hopescapes» reframed the quality conventions and value metrics of the people. As Boltanski and Thévenot argued[10], different social orders or «worlds» have their own criteria that guide judgement and action. These worlds can make a paradigm shift by advocating alternative orders of worth (Stark 2009). In the case of Gagliano, we can define three different orders of worth that challenged the state of existing affairs: the civic, the domestic and the environmental. In the civic world, Gagliano's «hopescape» inspired citizens to strive for self-sufficiency, pursuing self-determination, autonomy, democratic participation, collective decision-making, and social justice. These efforts made it possible to address territorial imbalances and inequalities by investing and innovating in the local area with the building of the REC. In the domestic world, authenticity, integrity, tradition and the preservation of local identity were the key building blocks to build on for the valorisation of the local community. These assets enabled citizens to pursue the survival of the community by fighting depopulation and the myth of city as the only locus of innovation and future. Finally, the environmental world encouraged aspirations for a better future through the preservation of the natural heritage, sustainability, and the protection of ecological resources for future generations. In doing so, these orders of worth fed a new hopescape for a place-based identity.

5.2. *Translating critical moments*

Gagliano's REC appears *prima facie* as an innovative project with ambitious aims. However, as previously illustrated, it is crucial to understand if and how the claimed critical capacity translates into concrete solutions and how the institutional context influenced the social change brought about. The field phase helped to make clear a number of points in this regard. First of all, it emerged a deep skepticism and mistrust towards the past public administrations that were considered as a provider of particularism within its «clanic» network. As one interview revealed: «That mayor who was there before only did what suited him and had to have a return. There's no point in hiding

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[10] See Boltanski, Thévenot 2006.

things here, anyone you ask knows it's true[11]». Dissatisfaction with previous policy decisions has eroded the institutional trust in the municipality's initiatives, thereby hindering community engagement. The new Mayor worked hard to fill this gap, but the shadow of the past is always there and works as a «filter». This did not affect homogenously the entire community: the activist members become «once reluctant citizens» and their pessimism for Gagliano's future was transformed into optimism and trust in the newly elected mayor. There is a positive attitude about the future and the work of the new mayor: «Well… lately I see something positive being done, on your part, by the new mayor. I don't see that environment anymore. That is no longer the case, something positive has changed»[12].

Nevertheless, this involves a minority of the inhabitants of Gagliano, while the large part of the community – if not opposing the initiative – is chiefly in the position of the *by-stander*. Despite the clear effort of the Mayor to dissociate himself from the former local government, he still encounters key difficulties in implementing the REC as a socio-technical innovation based on social goods such as trust and generalized reciprocal exchange. The success of the REC thus appears to be strongly shaped by the inherited institutional context and trust level. This, we believe, is a key point that underscores the need for a place-based policy approach to foster these kinds of initiatives (see Barca, McCann, Rodríguez-Pose, 2012). This point as a more general implication: it shows the challenges that the local contexts face in reconciling economic dynamism with social cohesion. Trust, which is essential for endeavours like building a REC in a marginal area, reveals the challenges involved in mobilizing the community into political practices, given that the inhabitants of marginal places have lost confidence in political institutions and public action[13]. Moreover, it shows that the presumption of radical change that is often if not always attributed to «real utopias» should not be taken for granted.

To fill the lack of institutional trust, the new public administration has no other way then being actively involved in the making of the REC. As we noticed, the role of moral entre-

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[11] Tr. Interview n. 5.
[12] Tr. Interview n. 1.
[13] On the role of place-based policies, see Barbera and Luongo (eds. 2024, section 2).

preneurs was actually covered by the new Major and the MIM group. Here a second issue clearly emerged from the fieldwork: the close link between the new local government and the MIM project endangers the role of MIM as a third-party *intermediaries* within the community. During the informal conversations with the residents of Gagliano, it became apparent that they encountered challenges in distinguishing the MIM project as separated from the Mayor. As we noticed, this closeness was somehow difficult to avoid in the start-up phase and was useful to bridge the inherited lack of trust, but at the same time it prevented the MIM project from being perceived as a genuine third-party between the Mayor and the local community.

Second, the establishment of Gagliano's REC encounters difficulties in matching the short-term needs with the long-term ones. The lack of resources, both in terms of payed workforce and financial constraints, compel the pursuit of short-term solutions to bridge the urgent daily needs. This nurtures a key daily «rhythm» that kept alive the enthusiasm of the action-research group, and that provisionally counterbalanced the lack of resources and the precarious condition of the MIM research group. Due to funding issue and short-term job contract, there is a high turnover rate and a strong overlapping between intrinsic motivation/civic commitment and remunerated labor/effort. RADEAs participation, as elsewhere underlined (Corsi *et al.* 2018), always mobilize the intrinsic motivation of agents and might thus easily generate *participation fatigue*, as all forms of these intense participatory experiments do. Furthermore, the absence of a formal recognition system with formal roles contributes to a lack of acknowledgement of the field researchers' role among the inhabitants, who sometimes have limited comprehension of the researchers' activities and objectives. They see them as «good boys and girls», we have been told, while underestimating their professional and formal role[14]. To build a working link between «my energy» and the «energy system», the boundaries between formal and informal need to be explicitly governed.

A key issue to check the coherence that link the critical capacity to its actual realization is the REC business model. Considering the six phases of the community engagement process

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[14] See the trailer of the documentary on Gagliano Aterno: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y6LC8oCZ_FE.

– informative, consultative, exchange of discussion, accountability, participation, and ownership – it can be stated that the Gagliano's REC is in between the consultative and the exchange discussion phases. There have been quite a lot of public discussions, direct participation events and municipal assemblies where the decisions where taken collectively and the debate was public, often in the square of the village. From this perspective, the project is currently in the start-up phase, akin to a pilot program in terms of its potential development. Further research will be imperative to monitor the progression and sustainability of the REC's establishment.

However, even if the process of building the REC is only in a preliminary phase, the business model is already designed in terms of some kind «community ownership». Since the solar panels are owned by the municipality, the revenue received from the resale on the market of energy and not consumed will be used to implement public services and to meet social needs. The estimate surplus is around 50.000 Euros, whose use will be defined by the needs of the inhabitants and by the emergencies to be met in the short term, such as the maintenance of the system. This kind of community-based decision-making process is facilitated by the low number of inhabitants and by the past experiences in the shared management of common pool resources. Notably, a history of shared management of the commons and a pre-reflexive ecological consciousness embedded in the sense of place make Gagliano Aterno's setting ideally suited for this business model. Historically, the collective management of common resources such as pastures, forests, ranches, mountain refuges, rural activities, strengthened the collective action of the local community (Ostrom 1990). As an example of collective management, one inhabitant described the reconstruction of a mountain refuge: «We actually rebuilt the Canale refuge, all volunteers, all people from Gagliano. We renovated the Canale refuge, we also renovated the Canale source. There is a need at a certain point and then it is organised and done»[15].

The sustainability of the territory, have been supported by the preservation of natural resources and the collaborative management of communal assets. This kind of social and symbolic capital provided a supportive framework that translated into

[15] Tr. Interview n. 3.

the REC business model. Further research will be necessary to assess if and how these «communitarian» business model will be realized in practice in the future. At this stage, the connection with the critical capacity seems at work in the organizational and business model sketched.

It is key to emphasize that, when needed, all Gagliano residents, including marginal individuals and by-standers, are actively involved in helping the community for the preservation and maintenance of local ecological capital. As one interviewer said: «Gagliano is one of the few villages that does things collectively»[16].

This «pre-reflexive» green attitude pairs with a lack of «re-flexive» ecological awareness in political terms, especially in the strong aversion displayed by some Gagliano residents towards the environmental movements. Greta Thunberg is not very popular in Gagliano: «I am the first to respect nature and the mountains. But today there is too much extremism, because you can't protect something at the expense of those who live from agriculture. The Greens didn't want us to build wind turbines in Gagliano. They disturbed the bear, the animals. The people who manage these things, the environment and these things, are too extremist»[17].

A genuine commitment to preserve the local environment is at work without an explicit political standpoint. The emphasis here lies on conservation as an imperative for a careful utilization of nature, aimed at preventing its overexploitation. This attitude is nevertheless decoupled from the politicization of the topic. The sense of belonging and attachment to Gagliano fosters an environment conducive to community engagement, but this does not feed a political framing of the REC apart from the minority of «moral entrepreneurs» and their closer circle. Even if the large majority of Gagliano's residents demonstrate a readiness to engage, help and contribute, as just underlined, this does not *per se* translate into or imply the politicization of the topic of energy and the support of green movements and environmental political parties alike[18].

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[16] Tr. Interview n. 4.
[17] Tr. Interview n. 1.
[18] On the different «shades» of green, see Tomnyuk *et al.* 2023.

6. *Conclusions*

The goal of this paper was to understand how critical capacity is first generated and then organized into formal arrangements, systems of exchange and relationship, organizational roles, and institutional rules. To this end, we analyzed the «critical moment» at the basis of Gagliano Aterno REC birth and how it developed as a result of a processes of marginalization. We illustrated in this regard the role played by moral entrepreneurship as distributed agency. We argued that the critical capacity depends on the presence of an «experiential space» that nurtures the value of a different future for a plural subject. These spaces are then translated in *socio-technical assemblages* where the joint commitment to act together for a different future engender collective effervescence and shared values. We framed the critical moments as fed by a moral entrepreneurship capable of generating symbolic and practical links between needs, solutions, interests and priorities more or less capable of «making themselves heard». In this light, we did not take for granted the self-description of the agents of change and we did not consider the local community as a kind of homogenous whole. We turned pour attention to the *marginal men* of the *marginal areas*, showing the multiplicity of roles and the different degrees of participation in the REC endeavor. Furthermore, we illustrated the effects of the REC on the expressive and communitarian dimensions, while underlining its partial decoupling with politics. In doing so, we showed the role of the inherited institutional context and organizational field, both as a driver for the community ownership in terms of previous common-pool resources management and as a constraint in terms of low-level of institutional trust. The shared governance and the decision-making processes that we were able to discern, although in their infancy, show how the formal organization of the REC is so far coherent with the critical capacity emerged in the start-up phase. However, further analysis will be needed in order to observe how the expressive and political dimension of the REC will actually intertwine. In this line, it should be stressed that the case-study involves a rather particular situation in the context of renewable energy communities and its generalizability needs to be taken with care.

Finally, we believe that the case-study offer some food for thought in connection to the topic of place-based identity poli-

tics, which is commonly thought to be *regressive*. Gillan Evans, for instance, identified «placeism» as being at the root of the shift to the right in UK politics over the past decade and more (2017). Yet, other forms of populism exist that are capable of fostering popular sovereignty and progressive policies of empowerment (Gerbaudo 2021). This paper embraced Dzur and Hendrik's notion of 'thick populism' which, contrary to 'thin populism' that erodes the deliberative and inclusionary principles of democracy, promotes democratic renewal and popular participation at a grassroots level (2018, 335) and thus reveals the *progressive* potential of place-based politics (Barbera, Bell 2024). It argued that fostering a positive territorial identity grounded in the co-construction of local control over foundational asset is a mean of addressing feelings of remoteness that are commonly found in marginal areas.

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Critical capacity and community engagement. The Janus face of Renewable Energy Communities

The crisis of liberal capitalism spurred the emergence of organized experiences for the production and/or distribution of goods and services in more or less explicit opposition/alternatives to the capitalistic system. They are forms of production, consumption and distribution of goods and services that try to build novel economic practices and realize their own «anti-capitalistic» mobilization aims. This hybrid nature makes them of specific interest for a sociological analysis at the intersection of economy, politics, environment and society. In this paper we show how the critical capacity at the roots of these experiments depends on socio-technical assemblages where the joint commitment to act together for a different future engender collective effervescence and shared values, capable of generating symbolic and practical links between needs, solutions, interests and priorities more or less capable of «making themselves heard». We also illustrate that fostering a positive territorial identity grounded in the co-construction of local control over foundational asset is a mean of addressing feelings of remoteness that are commonly found in marginal areas.

Keywords: Energy communities, critical capacity, anti-capitalism, marginal areas, community

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