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The struggle for problematising housing in Italy:
Reflections from Naples, Turin and beyond

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Abstract

During the last 15 years, amid the global impacts of the economic crisis, austerity politics, and increasing centrality of real estate and construction for capitalism, housing has taken central stage in public and political debates globally. In Italy, the trajectory of housing politicisation has been quite peculiar. Despite a longstanding tradition of housing conflict and a complex geography of new mobilisations, housing has remained at the margins of national discussions. Seen through the lens of Foucauldian problematisation analysis, housing has not been acknowledged as a 'problem' in Italy. This article engages with the Italian peculiarity through a comparative study of housing problematisation—operationalised through the dimensions of framing, coalitions and scale. I compare two cities where analogous challenges intersect with very different housing regimes and political contexts: in Turin, the capacity of short-term housing policies to address pressing problems is mirrored by a lack of engagement by institutional and politicised actors; in Naples, in a housing regime defined by informal solutions, the relations among the local authorities and social movements have oscillated among dialogue, conflict, institutionalisation and pacification. By putting these cases in conversation through a generative, relational and multi-scalar lens, I discuss housing problematisation in a country, Italy, characterised by deep regional asymmetries, regionally-specific housing regimes and a complex geography of housing conflict. By reconsidering the national case vis-à-vis broader dynamics, in conclusion, I also provide some takeaways for a reflection on the conditions, preconditions and efforts for scaling up the housing struggle.

Keywords

Housing politics, housing regimes, comparative housing, contentious politics, Southern Europe

Introduction

Italy is an outlier vis-à-vis recent global trajectories of housing struggle. While, in the last 15 years, housing has become a central issue in the public and political debate in countries all around the world, in Italy, despite the emergence of new movements and struggles, housing has remained at the margins of national discussions. In terms of Foucault's problematisation analysis (Foucault, 2001, pp. 171-173), housing has not been acknowledged as a 'problem' in Italy. Understanding why this has happened, in broad contrast to (Southern European, European and global) trends, can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of multi-scalar and relational dimensions of housing politics and struggles.

In this article, I compare, in multi-scalar perspective, two local cases of housing politicisation: Turin and Naples, two cities where analogous challenges—stemming from global and national trends, including the long wave of the last economic crisis and several decades of national disinvestment on housing—have impacted upon very different housing regimes, resulting in different housing politics. While in Turin housing movements have suffered from almost two decades of criminalisation of activism and migrants have been the actors of the recent relevant housing conflicts; Naples is characterised by a complex landscape of conflicts, both organised (activism) and semi-spontaneous (especially in squatted public housing). These differences are mirrored by radically different patterns of engagement between conflictual and institutional actors.

By placing these two cases within broader dynamics, I will offer some insights on crucial factors for the problematisation of housing in a country characterised by deep regional asymmetries, regionally-specific housing regimes and a complex geography of housing conflict: on the one hand, the role of different housing regimes and arrangements in defusing potential conflict; and, on the other, the different interactions between institutions and social movements, in terms of dialogue, conflict, institutionalisation and pacification. Before moving to the discussion of the two cases, the next two sections set out the coordinates for the use of problematisation analysis in the field of housing policy/politics—suggesting to operationalise it through the dimensions of framing, coalitions and scale; and frame the peculiarity of the Italian case vis-à-vis recent regional and global trends.

Problematising housing

Foucault never fully fleshed out the method of problematisation in a single text—he came the closest to this in the conclusions of a 1983 lecture in Berkeley (Foucault, 2001, pp. 171-173). The main coordinates for problematisation analysis in the field of politics/policy can be summarised following Borch (2015, pp. 5-9), and Barnett and Bridge (2016, pp. 1187-1190). In terms of focus, problematisation analysis explores the process of problem formation and responses suggested to it. In epistemological terms, problematisation analysis is neither completely an attempt at revealing ideology, nor a fully constructivist analysis of power-knowledge: '*problematisation* opens up a space for a variety of possible responses to the particular problem, and the *problematisation analysis* is then about examining the

problematisation itself, as well as the problem-response configurations it engenders' (Borch, 2015, p. 7; emphasis in original).

Through problematisation, I intend to articulate an analytical perspective (understanding how a problem is formed) and a strategic one (reflecting on how a problem may be addressed from specific political/normative stances) on housing politics. Considering the way housing is constructed as a problematic field and the type of responses put forward by the state and other actors implies engaging with the conflicting forms of knowledge over housing. At its roots, this conflict is one between two opposite understandings: housing as a basic right and as a commodity (see Rolnik, 2013; Santos & Ribeiro, 2022; Davoli & Portelli, 2023). Understanding how the problematisation of housing has moved, in space and time, along the spectrum defined by these understandings contributes to explain why housing policies have moved along the spectrum between universalist housing welfare to state-driven housing financialisation.

I propose to operationalise the study of housing problematisation by considering three dimensions: framing, coalitions and scale. *Framing* is the 'process of defining what is going on in a situation' to encourage action (Noakes & Johnston, 2005, p.2): it is by considering a multiplicity of framing processes that I will analyse the problematisation of housing. To begin with, it is a matter of framing problems as pertaining, or not, to the field of housing, with implications for the choice of responses—we will see how housing problems are often framed outside of the housing field, for instance. Conversely, the process of framing housing as a right or commodity has implications for the management of conflictual practices: for instance, is squatting a process of reclaiming the right to housing or a crime against commodity owners? Understanding how and why some paradigms become dominant, second, implies considering the *coalitions* created by actors advocating different framings. For instance, are social movements seeking a common ground with political parties to push policy change or do they favour the production of autonomous responses (typically, through squatting)? Finally, third, since competences for housing are distributed among several levels of governments—from the local to the national and, in Europe, the supra-national (see Allegra et al., 2020)—, only through a *multilevel and multi-scalar perspective* can the problematisation of housing be explored. Are, for instance, local coalitions capable of affecting housing systems? Or are the national (and supra-national) policies so prevalent that only at those levels can significant change be achieved?

By looking at the framing of housing by various coalitions of actors in multi-scalar perspective, I aim to provide both analytical and strategic takeaways: in analytical terms, a more precise understanding of the reasons why Italy is a peculiar case vis-à-vis global trends of housing politicisation; in strategic terms, a reflection on the conditions, preconditions and efforts for the problematisation of housing. My strategic reflections, I should disclose at this stage, move from the normative position that housing is, and should be problematised as, a basic right.

Deviant Italy?

In the aftermaths of the global financial and economic crisis of the late 2000s, the accelerating financialisation of real estate and housing, together with the growth of international tourism and mobility of wealthy classes, have produced a truly global housing crisis, met by fierce re-politicisation (see, among others, Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Vilenica et al., 2019; Potts, 2020; García-Lamarca, 2022). Italy has recently experienced increasing conflict (see, e.g., Grazioli, 2021; Portelli, 2021): 'there clearly exists a new generation of movements born in the first half of 2010s,' I wrote in my fieldwork diary during a national meeting of housing movements in October 2021. However, the existence of a plurality of, often fierce, local experiences of activism and struggle has not fostered a return of housing to the national political and policy agenda (Petrillo, 2017), not even with the explosion of the Covid-19 pandemic, whose socio-economic consequences have deepened longstanding problems (Accornero et al., 2020; Esposito, 2020; Gainsforth, 2020). That housing remains marginal to the Italian political debate was confirmed by virtually all the interviewees in Turin and Naples:[1]

> it's not really useful we beat about the bush: my conclusion is that there is no housing policy in Italy (councilman, City of Turin).

> Let's put it like this: housing issues and their space in the political agenda have been forgotten by everybody. Housing is not a topic to be used during elections, [not] a topic that brings votes (union representative, SICET Turin).

> Why has the [regional] housing policy been interrupted for several years? Well, because of the end of national funding (public employee, Region Campania, Directorate Government of Territory).

> Housing has not been considered by [national] governments for decades now (councilman, City of Naples).

In a recent article, I and Nadia Caruso (2021) have thus framed Italy as a deviant case (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006) in terms of housing (re-)politicisation when contrasted to other Southern European countries (Spain, Portugal and Greece). All Southern European countries have been hit hard by the economic crisis, austerity policies and, afterward, an economic rebound dependent on real estate and tourism, causing fast processes of gentrification and touristification (e.g. Alexandri, 2018; Jover & Diaz-Parra, 2020; Tulumello & Allegretti, 2021). However, patterns of politicisation have been quite different, with Portugal and Spain being exemplary cases of the global trends of re-politicisation: social movements managed to frame housing as a national problem, ultimately forcing institutions to implement policy responses (see, e.g., de Andrés & Smith, 2019; Tulumello & Mendes, 2022).[2]

Why has Italy had a peculiar, if not absent, re-politicisation of housing vis-à-vis Southern European and global trends? Let us preliminarily rule out two (simplistic) explanations. First,

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[1] These and following translations are mine. See below for methodological details.
[2] Granted, the latter have not 'solved' housing problems and reforms have been criticised for being insufficient or counter-productive (see, for the case of Portugal, Tulumello & Silva, 2019; Mendes, 2020)—reminding us that the struggle for problematising housing is a never ending one.

the reason is not the absence of housing problems, as the economic crisis has caused fast-growing housing hardships, evictions and mortgage defaults, while not much has improved during the following years of slow growth (Davico, 2019; Pozzi, 2019). Housing hardships, especially involuntary rent arrears and housing deprivation, are particularly intense for migrant households (Medici Senza Frontiere, 2018). Second, Italy is characterised by very high rates of homeownership, a factor historically associated with the pacification of social conflict (Di Feliciantonio & Aalbers, 2018). However, this cannot explain the Italian peculiarity, as Italy's homeownership rate is in the European average and is lower than that of countries like Spain and Portugal, which have experienced a national re-politicisation of housing (Filandri et al. 2020, fig. 4.1).

The aforementioned study (Tulumello & Caruso, 2021) based on the case of Turin, suggested three arguments for the absent re-politicisation of housing in Italy (further details below): the capacity of certain local policies to address potential sources of conflict; the absence of any bridges between conflictual and institutional actors; and the pacifying role of the 'populist' local government. Because of the complex geography of housing regimes and politics in Italy, however, the case of Turin can hardly be generalised. This is why, in this article, I expand that study by deploying a comparative lens to explore housing problematisation in Italy.

Case selection and methodological notes

This article is based on comparative case study analysis grounded on empirical data collected during two intensive fieldwork periods: June/July 2019 in Turin and October/November 2021 in Naples. The strategy for the selection of the cases is based on a multi-scalar and relational approach (Tulumello, 2022): complementary because of profound differences, the two cases have analogous characters against which the comparison is framed (see also Robinson, 2016, on comparative urban studies). Theorisation is based on contrasting the impacts, in different contexts, of similar challenges pushed by broader (national, global) trends. Turin and Naples allow to explore trajectories of housing problematisation within different housing regimes, which are by and large typical of Northern vs. Southern Italian large cities: while Turin, considered a European 'best practice' for its multilevel housing policies, helps testing the capacity of institutional action to stem social conflict; Naples is, in turn, paradigmatic of the role of informal networks and practices (including squatting) in dealing with the absence of universal housing welfare. Also relations among institutional actors and social movements are radically different as Naples is characterised by complex relations of dialogue and conflict, which are absent in Turin. In this sense, Turin and Naples are cases of 'maximum variation' (Flyvbjerg, 2006) vis-à-vis the Italian dynamics of housing problematisation. At the same time, Turin and Naples have analogous characters that are crucial with respect to the field of conceptualisation of this article: besides being considered to be 'crisis cities' (De Rosa & Salvati, 2016; more on this below), they are representative of the main national dynamics under investigation, that is, profound housing problems and fierce histories of contentious politics.

Methods-wise, my main sources of evidences are 27 in-depth interviews or focus groups[3] (15 in Turin, 12 in Naples; see Appendix) with key-informants identified among different levels of government (Region, Metropolitan City, Municipality), the non-profit and social entrepreneurship sector, the private sector, advocacy and activist groups, and scholars. Interviews, which lasted between 31 and 97 minutes, were transcribed and analysed thematically.

Additionally, I have carried out ethnographies with social movements—which I consider to be exploratory because of the short time I had. I entered the field through contacts provided by personal acquaintances, and by contacting some of the most active socio-political and cultural spaces of the two cities (*centri sociali* in Turin, *beni comuni* or *spazi liberati* in Naples[4]). In Turin, the ethnography was made difficult by several years of state repression (see, e.g., Chiaromonte, 2019), which has weakened social movements and made activists quite reluctant to share information: I conducted one interview with an activist that supported two housing squats and four informal conversations during public events. For these reasons, I only use ethnographic findings in Turin to report existing activities, thereby refraining from suggesting explanations from the viewpoint of activists (see also Tulumello & Caruso, 2021). In Naples, I found social movements to be more open, in part because of the different relations with the local government. I participated in several activities in *beni comuni* and *spazi liberati*, in addition to collecting three interviews with representatives from collective Magnammece 'o Pesone, and the local chapters of Network SET (Network of Southern European Cities facing Touristification) and Asia (Associazione Inquilini e Abitanti; Association Tenants and Inhabitants).[5] In the case of Naples, I can provide insights into political rationalities of activist groups, at the same time having to pay careful attention to my positionality as an external supporter of these struggles. During the visiting period in Naples, I also participated in a two-day national event in Pisa,[6] where housing movements from all around Italy met.

In terms of analytical strategy, I adopt a generative tactic of comparison, 'in which a virtual field of conceptualisation can be provoked and enriched through bringing different singularities, or cases, into conversation' (Robinson, 2016: 18). Operationally, I take advantage of the aforementioned arguments emerged inductively from the case study in Turin (see Tulumello & Caruso, 2021). This has implications for the empirical discussion: since empirical findings from Turin are available from the previous article, I will summarise the main takeaways from that case, leaving more space to discuss the case of Naples in detail.

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[3] Focus groups resulted from the decision of some interviewees to invite a second participant, because they believed the latter had better or further information on the topics to be discussed.

[4] The use, in Naples, of terms *beni comuni* (commons) and *spazi liberati* (liberated spaces) to refer to what, in Italy, is usually called *centri sociali* is part and parcel of the peculiar local politics I will discuss below.

[5] Note that I consider this union representative to be part of social movements because of the autonomous, left-wing politics of Asia (part of grassroots union confederation USB), while I consider the union representative interviewed in Turin to be part of an advocacy group because of the institutionalised approach of SICET (part of the centrist and Catholic union confederation CISL). Their difference is also evident in the approach vis-à-vis practices like squatting, which are supported by Asia (see Grimaldi, 2022) and considered problematic by SICET (see CISL Piemonte, 2018).

[6] Casematte, October 30-31, 2021. See www.facebook.com/events/406365280862504/.

Analogy in difference: urban and housing regimes in Turin and Naples

Urban dynamics: two crisis cities?

The framework for the comparison is made up of two very different urban and housing regimes undergoing analogous socio-economic challenges. Turin (890,000 inhabitants), the 'Italian Detroit' formerly home to the national automotive sector, was dramatically reshaped by de-industrialisation. As the efforts been made for a transition toward a service-based economy only partially succeeded (Vanolo, 2015), the late 2000s economic crisis hit Turin and its labour market especially hard. Also Naples (970,000 inhabitants) has been significantly affected by de-industrialisation and the even more difficult attempts at reconverting. The struggles typical of post-industrialisation, however, have added further layers to a metropolitan region historically characterised by informality, sprawling urbanisation and the powerful role of organised criminality (*camorra*), pushing some academic observers to consider Naples a paradigmatic 'crisis city' (De Rosa & Salvati, 2016) and some to recover old tropes such as the 'Third World' one (Segond, 2021). The scarce epistemological utility of conceptualisations based on parochial worldviews has been exposed by the likes of Dines (2019) or Laino (2022). A public historian (NapoliMonitor), interviewed, noted that,

> with productive restructuring [in] the supply chain of gloves and shoes—which are very important sectors for Naples and its province, which export all around the world—, industries would close and people would work at home. This meant shoe uppers [being produced] at home and unhealthy housing conditions. This, somehow, also deconstructs the parameter of underdevelopment often used for the city of Naples […]. My hypothesis […] is that, in fact, we have been experiencing a vanguard of an ultra-liberal, extractive [*di rapina*] capitalism (public historian, NapoliMonitor).

And yet, the idea of crisis helps to make sense of recent challenges in housing policies and regimes. First, decades of debt and austerity have deeply limited local authorities' capacity to act. In Turin, a councilman, interviewed, stressed the service of debt as one of the main reasons of the impossibility to expand housing policies. In Naples, austerity is made even more pronounced by the accumulation of Italian regional asymmetries and of the debt taken by the municipality after the 1980 earthquake. On the one hand, the national Court of Auditors has long been asking the City to 'valorise' public assets: this means pressures for selling public housing (see Esposito, 2022) and that reconverting municipal buildings into social or temporary housing is hard to justify—'the assets must yield profits' (head of department, City of Naples, Directorate Welfare). On the other, the City suffers of 'a historical lack of public employees. When I was hired, the City of Naples had 15 thousand employees, now we are 5 thousands' (idem).

Second, despite relatively low and overall stagnant prices, both cities are characterised by profound housing hardships, driven by growing poverty and the long impacts of the last

economic crisis,[7] and evident in rising difficulties with loan repayments and rent, as well as in the extremely long lists for access to public housing (Davico, 2019; Città di Torino, 2020; Esposito & Chiodelli, 2021, p. 6; Romano, 2022). Much like at the national level, housing hardships are particularly intense for migrant populations (Bolzoni et al., 2015; Fraudatario, 2018), as well as single-parent households, separated families and young couples with unstable and precarious jobs (head of department, City of Turin, Directorate Public Housing; head of department, City of Naples, Directorate Welfare). At the same time, the recent growth of sectors like tourism (especially in Naples) and higher education (especially in Turin) have deepened spatial inequalities, fostering gentrification and touristification (Semi & Tonetta, 2021; Caputi & Fava, 2023).

Housing regimes: from public policy to informal solutions

The framework of analogy in difference is even more significant to discuss housing regimes, as we can observe, in Turin, a capacity of public policies to address the most pressing problems, which are, in contrast addressed by informal 'solutions' in Naples.

Let us start with long-term housing solutions, which in Italy fundamentally means public housing. Though the stock is insufficient to address all needs, the City of Turin is able to allocate about 500 units/year, half to households in the waiting list, half to 'housing emergency', Italian jargon for households that have lost their shelter (head of department, City of Turin, Directorate Public Housing). Thanks to the good management of the public housing stock, Turin is, among Italian big cities, the one with the least squatted units, less than 50 until 2015, 112 in 2020 (Città di Torino, 2020: 93; on this growth, see below). Where, however, Turin is internationally considered a 'best practice', is its articulated system of short- and mid-term responses to the most acute problems. Managed by a multilevel network of public and private actors, this system is made up of four types of actions (see Caruso, 2017, ch. 3): first, financial support to families struggling to pay rent or mortgage instalments, funded by the region and bank foundations; second, *housing sociale*, an Italian term for targeted forms of temporary housing in public-private partnership; third, temporary allocation of units of *housing sociale* and public housing to 'housing emergency'; and, fourth, several forms of rental housing agreements. These interventions unpack housing needs, targeting narrow, specific categories, and are particularly effective where the potential for social conflict is particularly high: 'in situations of eviction and repossession; supporting middle-class households squeezed out of the market by sudden losses of income, but who are not poor enough to get public housing—dubbed, in Italy, *la zona grigia*, the "grey area"; improving the meeting of supply and demand' (Tulumello & Caruso, 2021, p. 882).

The situation is dramatically different in Naples, where 'the last [public] housing has been built in the 1960s and there's nothing after that' (union representative, Asia). As basic upkeep has not been guaranteed, the state of the stock is very poor and no public housing

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[7] In Naples, the housing crisis is also deepened by the long wave of the 1980 earthquake, to whose damages the main response was the clearance of large areas of the historical centre, and the expulsion of popular classes toward public housing districts in the East and North.

unit has been formally allocated for more than two decades (public employee, Region Campania, Directorate Government of Territory).

> Waiting lists haven't even been updated, the units that should be allocated are almost always squatted and the policymaker is faced with the puzzle: 'I should remove this family to allocate the unit to the family in the waiting list, but this would mean putting yet another family in the street.' […] Back to square one (program coordinator, Agenzia Sociale per la Casa).

Policies in Naples are also much less capable of providing solutions to urgent needs. First, vouchers for the rental market have sporadically existed, more recently during the Covid-19 pandemic, but with significant difficulties in reaching potential beneficiaries (public employee, Region Campania, Directorate Government of Territory; union representative, Asia). According to the union representative, the main support has been the national basic income created in 2019:

> here, the *reddito* [colloquial name for Reddito di Cittadinanza, basic income] has really allowed [people] to not lose their home. I have no idea how would so many households had done without the *reddito* during the pandemic.

Second, *housing sociale*, promoted almost exclusively by bank foundations, is virtually absent in Southern Italy: 'we have no partners. [Bank] foundations do not come here' (public employee, Region Campania, Directorate Government of Territory). Arciconfraternita dei Pellegrini, a guild affiliated to the Catholic diocese, allocates about 600 housing units at rents about 20-30% below market prices (focus group, Arciconfraternita dei Pellegrini). However, since, differently from *housing sociale*, the Church acts outside of any policy framework, an activist from Mangiammece 'o Pesone, interviewed, argues that the guild manages the stock in discretionary ways and has recently adopted a more entrepreneurial approach, including by raising rents.

Third, no 'housing emergency' policy exists. Municipal decision 1018/2014, pushed by social movements, had created the framework for *albergaggio sociale* (social lodging), with the goal of refurbishing public buildings to provide short-term solutions for loss of shelter. However, no action has ever been implemented (activist, Magnammece 'o Pesone; see also Asia Usb Napoli, 2018; Musella, 2019).

Finally, no effective practice of rental agreements exists. The last attempt, launched in 2019 in the context of the creation of the Agenzia Sociale per la Casa (Social Agency for Housing),[8] has fundamentally failed, because of administrative burdens, scarce resources allocated, the increased difficulties during the pandemic and lack of interest from landlords: 'Agenzia per la Casa has not succeeded [*è un incompiuto*],' said a program coordinator.

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[8] The municipality received funding from a national programme (PON 3 Metro) and launched a tender for technical assistance in the creation of the Agency. The latter was won by GESCO, umbrella group of social enterprises. According to a program coordinator (Agenzia per la Casa) and an activist (Mangiammece 'o Pesone), the Agenzia has above all supported households in getting access to existing supports (like rental vouchers).

According to Esposito (2022), the historical absence of policies has paradoxically contributed to create a space where the housing market has remained relatively less affected by large-scale, international speculation. In this field, the other face to local, smaller-scale, but not less intense, speculation—as famously depicted in Francesco Rosi's masterpiece *Le mani sulla città* (1963)—is the recourse to informal networks and solutions. On the one hand, the city is pinpointed of substandard housing units created by the conversion of former storage spaces, garages or shops. This is particularly prevalent in the historical centre, in so-called *bassi*, basement studios with no other opening than the entrance door. While significantly less than some decades ago, some 40 thousand people still live in some 15 thousand *bassi*,[9] in many cases migrant households, for whom *bassi* are a first, cheap housing solution. This, however, may be changing, as many units are being converted into short-term rentals and the experience of living in a *basso* advertised to tourists (public historian, NapoliMonitor).

On the other hand, squatting's scale makes it one of the most relevant dynamics in Naples. Politically organised squatting, above all in empty public housing, has long been a prominent feature of housing conflict in Naples, especially at the heyday of proletarian and sub-proletarian organisation in the 1970s, with a crucial role played by *disoccupati organizzati*, movements of the unemployed (public historian, NapoliMonitor). The peak of the movement followed the 1980 earthquake, as the failure of formal policies to provide solutions gave strong legitimacy to squatters (activist, Magnammece 'o Pesone). The 1980s (when *disoccupati organizzati* were criminalised), 1990s and 2000s, like in most Italian cities, have seen a progressive de-politicisation of housing squats—while politicised socio-cultural occupations were on the rise (De Falco & Punziano, 2020). Politicised housing squatting has re-emerged since 2012, as the movement Magnammece 'o Pesone organised 12 occupations in buildings owned by the municipality:

> we decided […] to squat in historical neighbourhoods and aim at smaller numbers. [We decided to] not [promote] squats with 350 families,[10] but with around 50, 60 persons—including families and individuals—in each occupied building (activist).

As we will see below, this experience was an important piece of the dialogues and conflicts between activism and local authorities. However, explicitly politicised practices have a very small scale when compared to that of the occupations in public housing. Indeed, the weakening of the movement after the 1980s did not imply a reduced prevalence of squatting in public housing; rather its progressive de-politicisation and the emergence of new players. Presently, roughly half of public housing units are squatted (head of department, City of Naples, Directorate Welfare). Esposito and Chiodelli (2020; 2021) have shown the complex network of actors that shapes this landscape, both in terms of access (which can be mediated by criminal actors, networks close to political parties, neighbourhood networks or mouth-

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[9] No official data exists. These figures are estimates by Giovanni Laino, professor of planning at the University of Naples Federico II and expert on the Naples' historical centre—not a participant to my study, prof. Laino has authorised me to share this information provided in a personal communication.
[10] In contrast to a large squat in Rome, to which this activist had participated.

to-mouth) and relations with public institutions. Of course, injustices and violence are not absent from this field:

> [consider] the issue of *camorra*, which interacts with several dimensions, including public housing. I mean, these are dynamics that in some cases remain underground, in others are more visible, but at any rate also define some of the modalities of the access to housing (researcher, urban studies).

Beyond public housing, a telling example is the way, with the boom of tourism, criminal organisations have acted as mediators in 'clearing' units, in the historical centre, to ease their reconversion to the short-term rental market (activist, Network SET).

Difference in analogy: housing problematisation in Turin and Naples

We can now move to discuss the different trajectories of housing problematisation in Turin and Naples—this section focuses on framing and coalitions, moving to scale (up) in the next section. Here, the analogy is that, during empirical work, the two cities were undergoing cycles of local governments led by non-traditional parties. In both cities, economic hardships and increasing inequalities have contributed to the weakening of the centre-left, third-way elites that had governed since the 1990s. In Turin, 'populist'[11] Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S; 5 Stars Movement) won the municipal elections in 2016, capitalising on the discontent of the most peripheral and deprived neighbourhoods (Cepernich et al., 2018). Naples had been governed since 2011 by an independent left-wing mayor, Luigi De Magistris, under whose tenure Naples has been experimenting with municipalism (Pinto et al., 2022). In late 2021, centre-left has taken power again in both cities.

Turin: fragmentation, conflict, institutionalisation

In Turin, *centri sociali*—the main hubs of contentious politics—have almost exclusively supported squatting. For instance, the recent growth of squatting in public housing is attributed to the support provided by *centri sociali* (head of department, City of Turin, Directorate Public Housing). However, in line with the hardships faced by social movements more broadly (see above), a generalised perception of weakness and fragmentation of the movement was widespread. As mentioned above, the scale of squatting in Turin is, both in public housing and private buildings, by far the smallest of Italian large cities. And activists from one of the *centri sociali* I interacted with admitted they had willingly decided to retreat from the housing field after several defeats.

As racialised populations have benefitted the least from the set of policies previously analysed, it should not be surprising that the main squatting practices have been led by migrant households and asylum seekers, with the support of activists from some *centri sociali*.

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[11] Thus M5S is commonly referred in the media and political scientist parlance, also because of its long-term refusal to be defined within the right-left spectrum. For a critique, based on the case of Turin, see Tulumello and Caruso (2021).

The biggest squat—Ex MOI, a complex of residential units built for the 2006 Winter Olympics—was being cleared as I completed my fieldwork in 2019. Instead, Spazio Popolare Neruda (Popular Space Neruda), in a municipal building occupied in 2015, was still in good health in late 2021:

> the issue of managing health issues in a context of community life amid the pandemic. An outpatient clinic (which is open to the neighbourhood) has been created, recently, with the broader goal of engaging with health issues.[12]

The leadership of racialised groups has often been mirrored by a re-framing of housing conflict as pertaining to the field of migrations or security. This was the case for the clearing of the Ex MOI, for instance when it was considered, in the progressive press, a best-practice example of integration (e.g. Camilli 2019). From the opposite field of local politics, a complementary framing is pushed by the right vis-à-vis squatting in public housing, as exemplified by the words of then regional party whip of FdI (Fratelli d'Italia; Brothers of Italy):

> all illegal squats are wrong, but those made by Roma people bring with them unacceptable decay [*degrado*] and unbearable living conditions (apud Cravero 2020, 10).

In terms of the building of coalitions, my ethnography and interviews suggest that this is a field where almost no relationships has existed among conflictual and institutional actors. The former have rarely been interested in dialogue, for instance to foster the legalisation of the squats.[13]

Similarly, the latter shows no interest whatsoever in building bridges. Consider the opinion of a union representative from SICET Turin:

> at times, we have asked ourselves whether, in order to push political parties to listen to us […], we should get to such extreme [practices]. Isn't following the rules and believing in what we do enough? Unfortunately, the press doesn't cover our constant [work]… our daily meetings, our mails, our calls. The press covers those that squat. […] They end up on the newspapers, [but] theirs is a misrepresentation of the problem.

In general, the arguments of those who oppose squatting are well-known: on the one hand, the legalistic one—squatting as a crime, in line with an understanding of housing as being primarily a commodity; on the other, the idea that squatting in public housing, by allowing some households to 'jump the line', fosters a war of the poor against the poor (head of department, Region Piedmont; union representative, SICET Turin).

These ideas were also expressed by a representative of the M5S local government (councilwoman, City of Turin). While not interested in engaging with conflicting practices, the local government, despite having been elected on the grounds of claims of radical change, also ended up keeping housing policies fundamentally untouched. As we anticipated, one of the arguments was that municipal finances did not allow to expand funding. Another

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[12] Fieldnotes from Casematte, report from activists engaged in the squat.
[13] For the only exception, the regularisation of a squat in a building owned by the local diocese, see Tulumello & Caruso (2021, p. 885).

argument, however, was the acknowledgement of the quality of policies in this area, that is, an argument on the importance on maintaining continuity:

> my idea is that, [in policy] like in the kitchen, whatever works should not be trashed. You keep it, you give it value and you insist on whatever is working (idem).

Quite interestingly, the institutionalisation of M5S in Turin—which, beyond housing, concerned the entire spectrum of its politics/policies (Biancalana, 2017)—has been premonitory of national developments. Indeed, the movement that had long promised to never make any coalition with traditional parties managed to participate in three national governments, between 2019 and 2022: first with far-right Lega Nord, then with centre-left Partito Democratico and finally in a broad coalition spanning centre-left to right.

Naples: collaboration, local democracy, pacification

In terms of the scale and strength of housing movements, interviewees stressed the discontinuity with the struggles of the 1970s (see above) and placed the Neapolitan movement in contrast, as being smaller and weaker, to that of Rome—the Italian city where, e.g., the squatting movement is the largest (see Grazioli, 2021). Placed in comparison with Turin, however, housing movements in Naples are not only larger, but also characterised by more collaboration among actors, with significant implications for the local framing of housing. The pivotal actor, Magnammece 'o Pesone has been collaborating with Network SET (in anti-eviction picket lines) and Asia.

The latter has participated in the campaign that resulted in the aforementioned municipal decision 1018/2014, which, besides creating *albergaggio sociale*, opened a process of regularisation of the municipal buildings squatted by Magnammece 'o Pesone. Also in this case the municipal decision has fundamentally not been implemented—only one of the 12 buildings has been refurbished because of the lack of funding (activist, Magnammece 'o Pesone; Asia Usb Napoli, 2018; Musella, 2019). However, 1018/2014 exemplifies a crucial difference of the case of Naples vis-à-vis that of Turin in terms of both framing and coalitions: the fundamental tolerance of squatting practices by local authorities, and the complex relations between conflictual and institutional actors.

Esposito and Chiodelli (2020) have shown that squatting has long been accepted as a parallel system for the management of public housing—and one that frees overburdened municipal departments—as made evident by the various channels for regularisation. This, in turn, implies an entire set of tactics operated by squatters to move from occupation to stabilisation, problematising the classic dichotomy between politicised and non-politicised squatting.

> If this is the context [absence of policies, presence of organised crime], why shouldn't we consider the fact of finding one's own way of satisfying housing needs a form of resistance? Even more so [as people endeavour to satisfy] also the broader needs of the habitat […], including the least material ones: the idea of creating your own spaces of leisure, your own traditions, which produce a certain sense of community. [Of course,]

this does not contribute to the construction of truly alternative paths, […] [this] does not address the problem of the insecurity of housing [tenure].

[…] [Interviewer:] But does it influence policymaking?

I think so. For me the response is in the regularisations, the fact that, every so often, occupied public housing is regularised: the institution is fundamentally acknowledging its own failures in terms of management (researcher, urban studies).

While tolerance and regularisations of squats are long-term features of the local framing of housing (head of department, City of Naples), during the tenure of Luigi De Magistris the local government has pushed its collaborative attitudes even further, as evident in the aforementioned decision 1018/2014 and in the broader problematisation of housing.

we managed to achieve important results, for instance with the proximity residency. When Lupi Decree was approved […] there was the problem that the occupants couldn't be given the residency.[14] With some lawyers and the councilmen for urban planning, we managed to… bypass the [national] law [by referring] to constitutional principles. […] This has been one of the most important struggles for the movement for the right to housing, because it also allowed to take off a market for organised crimes, which has made a huge business out of providing residencies (union representative, Asia).

As far as legality is concerned, here it has been easier. And the government De Magistris has eased it. I mean, broadening concepts is easier here. While, in other places in the North [of Italy, the dichotomy legality/illegality] is sharper, here the border is a bit more unstable. […] And, indeed, a political organisation that has, among its values and principles, the defence of the weakest [sectors of society] should take steps from this, the idea 'this may be illegal, but is socially just' (idem).

Attempts at 'informalising' public policies—grounded on a framing of housing as a right— often clashed, however, with supra-municipal regulations, the national austerity regimes and, more broadly, conflicts with regional and national governments:

We tried to stretch, that is, to soften the rigidities of the guidelines for the requirements [to receive the rental voucher]. But we didn't manage. This because the head of department at the City of Naples, the person that formally signs decisions, told us that we would be breaking both regional and national regulations (program coordinator, Agenzia Sociale per la Casa).

We have found entire buildings being squatted by several families and tried to create condo regulations, so that they could [register and] pay utilities. It's however pretty hard, because one is operating under the spotlight […] of the Court of Auditors, which does not necessarily understand that the municipal real estate is not only useful to yield profit [to repay the debt], but that the vision of a municipality is also that of taking care of the

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[14] A provision included in art. 5 of national Decree-Law 47/2014 (converted into Law 80/2014), which also prohibits the provision of basic utilities to occupied units.

citizenry from a socio-economic point of view (head of department, City of Naples, Directorate Welfare).

Luigi [De Magistris] has clashed with virtually all the national governments he had to deal with. As a result, he has been willingly excluded from a number of supports[15] (program coordinator, Agenzia Sociale per la Casa).

This has had significant implications for the relationships between institutional and conflictual actors. For the local government, building coalitions with social movements has been crucial to maintain political legitimacy (councilman, City of Naples). This is particularly evident in the process concerning *beni comuni*, whereby the local administration and social movements have collaborated in the production of a set of regulations for the collective management of municipal buildings occupied for socio-cultural purposes (see Ostanel, 2021; Pinto et al., 2022). The experience of *beni comuni* and other practices of local democracy—popular assemblies and a popular audit of the municipal debt—have been considered experimentations in local democracy, with the production of 'mildly formalised or entirely informal institutional space' (Pinto et al., 2022, p. 6). Pinto and his colleagues consider this a Neapolitan 'anomaly' in the national context (idem), as confirmed by several cases of repression of social movements all around Italy, and particularly in northern cities, reported at meeting Casematte.

The field in which relations between social movements and the local government have been more conflictual is tourism management: '[with the municipality] we've only had conflicts' (activist, Network SET).

You still have some space for manoeuvre, because [Naples] is in a stage in which this accumulation and concentration [of ownership] is still developing. But [the municipal government] has not been brave enough [to act]. Early on, I would even understand [them]: you were coming out of the years of the crisis of waste management, which had implied a deep humiliation of the city, including at the level of imaginaries, you know? Naples submerged in garbage, [an image] travelling all around the world. […] I am not a fundamentalist, I do understand [the touristic boom] was felt with pride, during the first few years, and it had electoral dividends. But, then, damn! I mean, you have to deal with reality, with its impacts. You cannot be so liberalist, in this regard, and yet… (activist, Magnammece 'o Pesone).

More broadly, with the growing perception that grand intentions (e.g. municipal decision 1018/2014) were not being followed by achievements, conflict spread during De Magistris' second tenure:

[our symbolic occupations of the mayor's office and the City Hall] were not meant to just simulate conflict. [Rather,] dialogue had been stuck… it had become completely unproductive. I mean, there has always been [a dialogue], but it had become so scarcely productive that either we reacted or we would start losing the trust of people. In short, conflict has become more and more intense in time (activist, Magnammece 'o Pesone).

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[15] Refers, for instance, to the restructurings and haircuts of the debts of other large cities.

As my ethnography and interviews coincided with the end of the cycle—municipal elections were held and lost by De Magistris' coalition early during my fieldwork—, participants could express a complex evaluation of the experience. As we saw, this was partially positive, in terms of space of dialogue, acknowledgement of new practices of local democracy and a less legalistic, more socially just understanding of conflictual practices. At the same time, a common perception was that the very building of coalitions with the local administration has had a role in defusing conflict, and housing conflict in particular, including through the willy-nilly co-optation of movements. Quite interestingly, some of the most critical considerations were expressed off the record, after the end of interviews, confirming the deeply ambivalent nature of individual judgements:

> I make a provocation, asking the participant whether a government like De Magistris' can be instrumental to touristification by pacifying large parts of the left and social movements. The interviewee agrees, arguing that reacting to the problems with tourism would be easier against an administration that clears socio-cultural squats. What happened, according to the interviewee, is that the elderlies were being cleared to make space for tourism, while squats were left in peace.

> After I switch off the recorder, the participant states that the administration has worked as a blockage for the movements: having a meeting with the mayor and addressing specific issues was extremely easy, thereby offloading potential conflict.[16]

> A public historian from NapoliMonitor argues that movements have fallen into the 'illusion of being able to participate in the government of the city.'[17]

According to a researcher (urban studies), another problem has been the self-referentiality of *beni comuni* and *spazi liberati* (socio-cultural occupations that have not participated in the regulations of the former). This points to another critical dimension in social movements' action, that is, the difficulty in widening housing struggles, for instance the broad absence of engagement with migrant and racialised populations, including Roma people (researcher urban studies; public historian, NapoliMonitor).

> There is, indeed, an issue linked with, so to speak, the representativity of the movement (researcher, urban studies).

> Why does not [the housing question] explode? Because it's hard when a structured, politically organised movement does not include those that directly experiences the needs.

> *[Interviewer:] Are you saying that those that experience the most distressing situations are not politicised and don't even know they can organise politically?*

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[16] This and the former are fieldnotes taken after two interviews, which I do not attribute to further guarantee anonymity to declarations off the record.
[17] Fieldnotes from a public debate on touristification and public space organised by LIRe, network of independent bookshops, October 6, 2021.

> You don't manage to. […] In Naples, neighbourhood committees, the grassroots organisations that would bridge with politically organised movements, have been lost (program corodinator, Agenzia Sociale per la Casa).

Granted, broadening the social representativity of the struggle has been one of the main goals of Magnammece 'o Pesone and Asia; and yet, as admitted by the representative of the activist group and the grassroots tenants' union, this is far from being achieved. This, in a sense, is an opposite conundrum than that for housing politics in Turin: in Naples, the clearer framing of housing problems as pertaining to the field of housing policies has been mirrored by the absence of migrant and racialised populations from the coalitions of housing struggle.

Discussion and conclusion: problematising housing in Italy

To recap, the cases of Turin and Naples exemplify how analogous challenges for the right of housing—linked to the long-term absence of a national housing policy, the impact of global economic crisis, long-term austerity and neoliberal urban change—have unfolded amid very different urban and socio-political contexts. Within a national context characterised by a generalised absence of housing policies, the two case studies have shown very different local 'solutions' and trajectories of problematisation.

In line with a generative, relational and multi-scalar approach to comparison (Robinson, 2016; Tulumello, 2022), let us move to consider the arguments previously developed to make sense of the case of Turin, put them into conversation with the case of Naples and, then, scale up to consider the national scale.

First, Turin exemplifies the capacity of a good management of the public housing stock (even if insufficient to respond to all needs), together with multi-actor, multi-level, short- and mid-term housing policies, to address the most pressing housing hardships, thereby defusing several situations with potential for conflict—above all, the immediate risk of losing shelter, which has been crucial in the national politicisation of housing in countries like Spain in the years following the economic crisis. These policy arrangements are not universally available in Italy, because of the uneven national model of development, the regionalisation of housing policy and asymmetries in austerity regimes. The case of Naples exemplifies both a problematic management of the public housing stock and the virtual absence of short-term housing policies. Here, besides the somehow unexpected effects of a recent national welfare policy (Reddito di Cittadinanza), the most pressing housing problems are addressed by informal 'solutions'—substandard housing units, and occupations and informal management of the public housing stock—and a wide range of actors, from local networks and politicised movements to organised crime. These precariously assembled arrangements have come to be fundamentally accepted as constituting a component of the local housing regime. A regime that, paradoxically, implies additional difficulties for any attempt at expanding formal housing policies.

> [The housing question] has remained as such, a blight no one deals with. […] Since I have been working here, on this project, I have come to fear the idea that the

> Municipality would start to develop a strategy on housing, because that would raise the level of expectations, opening a scary Pandora's box (program coordinator, Agenzia Sociale per la Casa).

Second, it is above all where housing policies fail, by and large with migrant and racialised populations, that conflictual practices have emerged in Turin. Politicised squatting, led by migrants and supported by activist networks, have had an important role in providing housing solutions and spaces of autonomy; however, they have not contributed—because of the fundamental lack of links among institutions and conflictual actors—to any shift in the problematisation of housing. Quite the opposite, when squats and/or their repression has reached the public stage, it has been reframed, in the political and journalistic discourse, as a matter of migration, thereby pushing policy solutions that range from 'security' (advocated by the right) or 'integration' (advocated by the centre-left). At the same time, third, as far as institutional local politics are concerned, we could observe how 'populist' M5S first captured consensus in the areas of the city where potential for conflict was higher and then went through a process of institutionalisation—indeed, the role of M5S in defusing potential conflict at the national level has long been suggested by critical observers (Wu Ming, 2013).

These two arguments cannot be analytically distinguished in the case of Naples, where the boundaries between institutional actors and social movements have historically been much blurrier, even more so under the tenure of independent left-wing mayor Luigi De Magistris. On the one hand, local political arrangements are crucial in the production of the hybrid formal/informal housing regime we have described above. On the other, we could observe a very different pattern of problematisation. Local authorities have indeed acknowledged housing as a right and a problem, to the point of collaborating with practices elsewhere labelled as 'criminal', and developed policy attempts that have, however, by and large failed, for several reasons—national austerity and supra-municipal regulations, but also contradictory politics vis-à-vis touristic development. In a context favourable to experimentations in local democracy, social movements have been oscillating among collaboration and conflict, managing to obtain some (often symbolic) victories, but at the same time failing to articulate different problems and engage racialised populations, and at times falling into the trap of institutionalisation—and pacification.

In terms of Italian trajectories of housing problematisation, bringing the cases of Turin and Naples into conversation pictures a field in which the traditional challenges for activism and social movements—the dichotomies autonomy/agenda-setting and conflict/dialogue, the potential to articulate and scale-up struggles—play out in dramatically different ways within the same national context. On the one hand, the very existence of radically different housing regimes may partially explain the difficulty of building a coherent, national argument on the right to housing—the type of arguments (on mortgage default, on gentrification) that have proven very powerful in the national problematisation of housing in other national contexts. Indeed, during the meeting Casematte, the attempts at building a strategic conversation on what to do at the national level were systematically trumped by the reports of different local challenges and practices.

On the other, local movements have engaged this conflictual field in profoundly different ways: the fragmentation of the left has a deeply spatialised nature in Italy, at the very least in the field of housing—this is yet another important difference with countries where movements have been capable of building national campaigns, which have also proven useful in empowering local struggles. One important dimension of this fragmentation, we have seen, is in the different patterns of engagement of racialised populations, those that suffer the most from the housing crisis. In contexts like Naples, activist groups have not been able to engage racialised populations, thereby losing fundamental agency for the movement. Where, however, racialised populations have taken a central stage in the housing conflict, housing has been re-framed as a matter of immigration and security all around Italy (see Camilli, 2017; Annunziata, 2020), with significant policy implications. A telling example has been the use of the national funding for municipal initiatives for urban security[18] for 'experimental initiatives' for housing emergency: 'the housing question is thus (still) framed as a matter of public order' (Gainsforth, 2022, p. 146; my translation).

Finally, as a reminder of the dynamism of housing problematisation, let us note some recent evolutions, as the implications of the post-pandemic scenario for housing dynamics is still to be understood—for instance, new pressures for financialising the public housing stock are emerging in Naples (Esposito, 2022). As far as contentious politics are concerned, while the pandemic has made conflict harder—as all my interviewees in Naples suggested—, new attempts are emerging at framing national discussions (e.g. through the lens of financialisation: Portelli, 2021) and international collaboration (e.g. in the use of human right appeals to the UN to halt evictions: Davoli & Portelli, 2023).

In terms of its broader contribution to housing struggles, in conclusion, the discussion of a national case characterised by deep regional asymmetries, regionally-specific housing regimes and a complex geography of housing conflict has produced relevant takeaways for housing problematisation. These takeaways, I believe, do contribute to a broader reflection on the conditions, preconditions and efforts for a scaling up of the housing struggle from the local to the national (and international) level. Without being able to develop this argument in detail, not only does the historical record show that supra-local levels are fundamental for the production of universal housing welfare, but, I believe, scaling up is becoming increasingly crucial as housing financialisation makes power relationships at the local level more and more uneven. The Italian case, indeed, seems to confirm that the fragmentation of housing regimes (at the regional level) and housing conflict (at the local level) makes structural change particularly hard to achieve. The question, then, becomes the type of networks that can transcend local and national contexts in the making of a truly global housing struggle—at the same time engaging with and articulating different social groups' housing needs and political aspirations. A crucial analytical and strategic question—I hope this article has contributed to show—for those that want to push a problematisation of housing as a basic right.

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[18] Instituted by Decree-Law 113/2018, converted into Law 132/2018, art. 35-quarter.

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