

When Commons Becomes Official Politics

Exploring the
Relationship between
Commons, Politics,
and Art in Naples

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... what is the point of doing theatre when you have a desert around you?

– Andrea (actor, producer and activist from l'Asilo, Naples)

The 'Fifth State' and the 'Suspension of Democracy'

In march 2012, a wonderful three-storey 16th-century building (about 4000 square meters) located in the pulsating historical city centre of Naples, known as the ex-Asilo Filangieri, was occupied by a group of cultural activists. The building had been recently renovated to host the Universal Forum of Culture in 2013 and was at the centre of a huge debate about the absence of transparency in the management of the event and indeed of the building itself.

The occupation started a new political 'adventure' in the city of Naples. Different political forces joined hands for the first time, together denouncing the diffused state of illegality and the misuse of public money in this period of crisis. Naples was (and still is) a city of fragmented bottom-up initiatives enacted by the civil society, political groups, activists, and artists. The city has often played a prominent role in the formation of national political movements such as general strikes, anti-war marches, and student protests. Since the 1990's the city has been the home of numerous 'occupied centres' that cannot be framed in one single ideological context (Dines 2012). They have represented different needs, political practices, and national affiliations, such as the area of Autonomia Operaia, Anarchism, or various local forms of bottom-up participation.

Most of these movements participated in the occupation of the ex-asilo Filangieri but the 'leaders' were members of a new emerging 'creative precariat' composed of actors, theatre makers, researchers, and artists from different backgrounds and generations. This new 'emerging class' played a prominent role in the Occupy movement in Italy. It was also the protagonist of the occupation of the Teatro Valle, one of the historical theatres in Rome that was occupied in 2011 and the symbol of the 'Occupy' in Italy. Here they denounced the huge financial cuts to the cultural sector and the process of privatization by the Berlusconi government (leading a neoliberal right-wing coalition). This emerging class was indeed also the most active group (amidst a broader section of civil society and intellectuals) in promoting a debate around commons in Italy.

Between 2011 and 2013, the notion of '*quinto stato*' (fifth state) was adopted for describing this new creative category of activists who were generating a new cultural map of occupied spaces in different cities from Venice to Palermo, from Turin to Catania, Rome and Naples. In their books *Il Quinto Stato* (2013) and *La furia dei cervelli* (2011) Roberto Ciccarelli and Giuseppe Allegri described this movement and provided a picture of the life of the extended creative precariat: it was composed of self-employed, skilled, and mobile workers characterized by a permanent flexibility and deprived of fundamental social rights such as maternity leave or retirement benefits. These individuals are the 'fifth state', which refers to a mix of social classes and a typology of jobs that, although very different in nature, all carry the seeds of poverty. They represented a new labour force that was experimenting with forms of citizenship and economic resistance through forms of sharing economy, mutualism, and self-government.

The Fifth State is the universal state of statelessness at home where at least eight million Italians live whose fundamental social rights are not acknowledged. The same condition affects at least five million foreign nationals who are also excluded from citizenship rights because of their extraterritoriality in a state. (Allegri and Ciccarelli 2013)

The occupation of l'ex-asilo Filangieri (that from now was called l'Asilo) took place in Naples, after the election at regional level of the candidate supported by Berlusconi's party (Stefano Caldoro) in 2010. A significant implementation at municipal and regional level of the so-called 'spoils system' took place following these elections. In the cultural sector, the most important cultural institutions changed their boards and directors in favour of candidates linked to the new party in power. Accessibility to culture came under attack. The selection procedures for hiring new directors or collaborators in public institutions took place without any regulations or transparency. Even worst, the 'conflict of interests' that had characterized Berlusconi's government now took on concrete form in the city.

Public money devoted to the production of new events, the management of two of the biggest and publicly well-subsidized cultural Institutions, the re-instatement of an obsolete national theatre prize were concentrated in a few hands. The sector came

under the control of a small group (playing simultaneously the role of financier, subsidizer and promoter) that started allocating space to artists or intellectuals who were open to accept an ancillary role capable of supporting their views. The ruling political class found in big cultural events and in managing cultural institutions a powerful opportunity (and this was no novelty) for making propaganda and for creating an arena of consensus (mainly thanks to obtaining political votes in exchange for job positions).¹

Being based in Naples and involved in the cultural sector at the time when these events were taking place, I have personal experience of the spoils system that changed the cultural practices of the city. At the same time, I also witnessed the enthusiasm that accompanied the local municipal elections in 2011 when civil society was at the centre of political interest; and I also saw new bottom-up forces (like Occupy) grow stronger at national level.

I believe that the events that characterized the cultural sector in Naples during this period can be looked upon as a concrete example of 'suspension of democracy'. The only choices for the entire creative branch became either to accept the state of things, enter a form of exile, or to engage in protest. Andrea de Goyzeuta, (actor, producer, and activist of l'Asilo) describes the occupation in 2012 saying that:

... at the beginning, the leading group was constituted mostly of actors who were following the Teatro Valle experience. After one of the biggest manifestations in Rome, we felt the need to be together and to be back in Naples, bringing that experience and denouncing the difficult city context ... It was the moment at which the theatre activists came out from isolation. The debate around the commons was so strong in Italy that it had the capacity to be transversal to most of the social categories ... what is the point of doing theatre when you have a desert around you?

With this essay I mean to describe these events by giving attention to the practices of a new creative category in political activism and to the emerging notion of commons as political. Therefore, I will illustrate the process of conflict and collaboration between the top-down and the bottom-up forms of policy-making in creating a legitimized 'commonfare' in Naples as described by Michel Bauwens in this same publication.

Naples and the Commons

In 2011, new municipal elections took place. Emerging political forces appeared on the scene composed of civil movements and representing new political bottom-up forms of policy-making. One of the candidates for mayor was Luigi de Magistris (a judge, member of a larger movement of ex-judges). From the beginning of his political campaign, he foregrounded the notion of commons and the need for the city to re-start from the ground up (*dal basso*). In 2011, during his first mandate (2011–2016), the newly elected mayor nominated the first city-counsellor in Italy (and probably in the world) dedicated to the commons (he was in charge of facilitating the process of citizens' participation in the city). The mayor's administration changed the City Charter, introducing the legal category of the commons and the creation of an Observatory of Common Goods among the objectives and the core values of the City. His campaign and his government can be linked to two turning points.

Firstly, the national referendum for the recognition of water as a public and common good, which became a key moment in the debate on commons, democracy, and rights in Italy. About 27 million citizens voted and after a long process water was officially declared to be a public and a common good.² Secondly, the important juridical process that was enacted by the jurist Stefano Rodotà, the Teatro Valle, and the national community of the 'workers of immaterial labour', which gave birth to the 'Costituente dei beni comuni' (Constitution for the Commons) was aimed at a recognition in law of the commons in Italy and at finding a political answer to the important changes at cultural and political level. As Rodotà argued in 2012 in one of the main Italian newspaper, 'a new relationship between the world of people and the world of goods is taking place ... nowadays, the emphasis is no longer on ownership, but on the function that a common good has in society'.³

This new Constitution—which foregrounded the idea that commons have 'widespread ownership' and are an essential tool for citizenship rights and referred to Article 43 of the Italian Constitution—was focused on the possibility to entrust the 'user communities' (along with public bodies) with the management of essential services or energy resources. The theoretical shift was, from the notion of property to the 'management' of commons therefore implying a process of auto-determination of citizens and of participative democracy.

In this framework, the encounter (albeit a conflictual one) between the Municipality of Naples and the community of l'Asilo, has played a crucial role in the city, giving birth to a concrete experience of management of commons at city level, enacted thanks to a 'creative use' of juridical actions. The 'Declaration of the Urban and Civic and Collective Use' and the official Acts written in 2012, 2015, and 2016 are the results of a long journey of growth, conflict, and negotiation between the City and its (cultural) activists. Debates, protests, and occupations were all intrinsic parts of this debate. At the same time, jurists, policymakers, artists, intellectuals, and citizens from different generations and backgrounds from both parties built their legal assessment sharing (consciously or unconsciously) a common theoretical framework. Initially inspired by the 'Costituente dei Beni Comuni' and by the Italian debate around political commons, they have brought their local expertise and juridical perspectives in creating a new arena of debate.

The notion of 'civic use' is at the base of the new regulations that transform the relationship between the public administration and the citizens, a tangible example of a process of inter-legitimization of two arenas of practices (the formal and informal), which in the past it was impossible to imagine discussing at city level. In 2013, with the appointment of the new alderman for 'Urban Policies, Town Planning and Commons Goods', Carmine Piscopo, the juridical exploration of the notion of commons also became linked to the city's urban context and to the policies devoted to that. The difficulties the administration had in managing the extended architectural property in a context of near bankruptcy were made public. In order to give new life to part of the heritage, this heritage was conceived and defined as a good that belongs to the city. Almost a novelty for an Italian public administration.

Assemblies with citizens geared towards participative processes were enacted also thanks to the strong activism of movements such as 'Massa Critica', which in 2016 connected most of the political experiences of occupation in the city for creating a 'public agorà'. Together with the municipality, the city movements and the citizens opened up public debates about the concrete aspects of living in the city.

In a recent interview the city councillor Carmine Piscopo spoke to me extensively about the identity of urban places,

arguing that this identity cannot be defined by top-down urbanistic definitions,

... this identity is sensitive, is immaterial, and is created by how the citizenry transforms it. If a good belongs to everybody, let's make it public ... Like a public garden, which is a shared property that belongs to the city, in the same way the properties that belong to the city administration have to be accessible every day at any moment by everybody in a non-exclusive relationship ... The materiality and immateriality of the common goods are deeply tied to architectural practices where a concrete form is linked to emotional ties and to the collective memory of the people who live there.

As mentioned by Giuseppe Micciarelli (theorist and activist of l'Asilo) the notion of civic use is not only a terrain of encounter, but also the arena of experimentation with the creation of a participative democracy where the institution gives citizens the space to be active in forms of co-management of the political and cultural process of the city. In this context, the public administration changes its function. It does not intervene in an authoritative sense, but creates the conditions, through specific regulations of use, in favour of the development of a civil environment, supporting the citizens in their process of becoming a proper institution themselves.

The experience of l'Asilo, according to the official act of 2016, was extended to seven more occupied spaces, giving life to a 'system' of 'freed spaces' in the city. These 'emerging commons' have hence become a notion that coincides with a new way of understanding institutions as something that starts from a collective basis and is characterized, to borrow from Hardt and Negri (2009) and Virno (2004), by a multitude of singularities. The emerging commons thus become public institutions that collaborate with citizens to produce well-being. All of this process is happening through the creation of new regulations and aesthetics providing a substantial shift from the notion of participation in democratic life to an active creation of political forms moving towards what the sociologist Pascal Gielen (2015) defines as the 'Common City'.

Art, Politics and Commons

In this context, the commons are a political practice, an ideological approach globally shared (as the movements raised between the 2008 and 2011) but firmly anchored in their local contexts. A system of a bottom-up welfare (or commonfare) is taking shape at city level thanks to the extended work of the (cultural) activists that are trying to come to terms with the crisis that the city is going through. Mayor De Magistris defined in 2017 what is happening in Naples as a political project that is based on a collaborative form of politics shared with other cities that are proposing alternative models of resistance to the central governments and to global forms of austerity and repressive neoliberal policies. Today, the so-called 'Rebel Cities' are representing a trans-national (or trans-local) network where forms of collaborative city-governance are practiced. This statement reminds us of what Held defined as a 'cosmopolitan model of democracy' where 'democracy has to become not just a national but a transnational affair if it is to be possible both within a restricted geographic territory and within the wider international community (Held 2006, p. 306).

The 'Declaration of Urban Civic and Collective Use' is, in this framework, a concrete instrument that regulates the entire life of l'Asilo and its interlocation with the City Council. L'Asilo is described as an independent 'cultural laboratory' based on the endowment and sharing of means of production in the field of arts, culture, and performing arts. The accessibility for the citizens, the definition of the status of the 'inhabitants' and their rights, duties, and responsibilities, the role of the 'Assembly' as the primary instrument of self-government, the working tables,⁴ and the process of decision-making are all part of it. Therefore, the innovative aspect of l'Asilo is not only in the juridical process employed, but also in the creative and artistic practices represented within the arena where the experimentation takes place.

Gabriella Riccio (choreographer, activist, and researcher of l'Asilo) stressed, during my interviews with her, that what characterizes the art production and what is at the core of the 'model' of l'Asilo and regulates the relationships between the inhabitants and the extended citizens community is a notion of 'process'. At its core, l'Asilo has a theatre, a cinema, and laboratories of various types that are at the disposal of the citizens. A broader community of artists and citizens use these spaces thereby contributing to the life of l'Asilo with public presentations and/or cleaning and/

or exchanging goods. This process is fostering a reciprocal growth where art practices constitute the spaces for emotional experience that allow people to be connected and ideas and political interventions to be developed. Art is not ancillary to the political actions, but the zone where the political sphere can express itself.

As mentioned by the inhabitants of l'Asilo during my recent interviews, at the beginning the relationship with certain parts of the theatre community of the city—and especially with small- and medium- sized independent local theatres—was not easy. l'Asilo was perceived as a potential rival, facilitated by its 'illegal status' and, therefore, not obliged to pay royalties and regular costs. Promoting itself as a laboratory and not as a presentation venue, l'Asilo filled up a gap in the system, supporting the growth of independent and emerging artists. It made itself available as a space for rehearsals and reflection on developing new artistic processes. By doing so, it was accepted by the art community and also became a place of encounter for established artists and stakeholders, 'contributing' to the creation of the programming of small-sized independent theatres by guaranteeing the use of its rehearsal space for independent theatre companies.

Today, mainstream artists are also part of the broader artistic community. They are taking part in public talks or seminars and follow the experience at l'Asilo with interest. Also, events that include the participation of citizens or collaborative approaches among different creative forces of the city are strongly fostered.

The economic aspect of this process is still under observation from l'Asilo and from the City authorities. In light of the 'Declaration' and 'Communal act' of 2016, the Municipality takes care of the regular expenses (such as the cost of electricity), the watchman at the entrance of the building (for about eight hours a day), and extra work for the maintenance of the space. All the cultural activities such as courses, laboratories, the entire programme, the day-to-day organization, the implementation of technical equipment, the transformation of the spaces into venues accessible to the citizens fall under the responsibility of the occupants of l'Asilo. All these activities express the symbolical, social, and economic values that l'Asilo is bringing to the entire community.

All the activities are conducted on a voluntary basis. The revenues are exclusively used for the management of the activities or the production of specific collective events and may come from

voluntary subscriptions on the occasion of events or thanks to crowdfunding campaigns (as was the case with the creation of the cinema). In September 2017, l'Asilo won a competition called 'Culturability' organized by Fondazione Unipolis. It was the first time that a bank foundation recognized the participation in a contest about social regeneration through art practices by giving the award to an 'informal community'.⁵ Also, l'Asilo, as an 'informal community' represented a novelty in being part of a EU Network (as TransEuropeHall) participating in a European context with its practices and values in a reciprocal exchange at EU level.

In light of all these practices, questions about sustainability in times of crisis come to mind where artists and the creative precariat seem to play the role of economic problem-solver of social and political crises. On the other hand, this process could also be seen as an inevitable new path for creating a new form of governance and a new 'aesthetics of the real' as mentioned by Gielen in the introduction.

Andrea, Gabriella, Giuseppe and other theorists and activists from l'Asilo consider the recognition of the informal community in its variable and uncertain form by the public institutions, not as a way to accommodate or ease the conflict brought by new emerging forces, but, as Giuseppe underlines, as a way to 'to maintain a dialectical level in the debate in a new form of direct management that shifts the actual site of power from the political institution to the citizens'.

Where Are We Going?

The 'creative' juridical forms, the role of the art community, together with the innovative collaboration between two different political positions (the Institutions and the movements) and the affirmation of a new cultural precariat reminds us of what Gielen and Lijster called the 'social sequence' (Gielen and Lijster 2016). Starting from the expression of emotions—which often lies at the origin of civil actions (Castells 2015)—through 'rationalization', then 'communication', 'de-privatization' (going public) and finally 'self-organization' of this emotion, and through the exchange of values and practices a political reaction becomes a political form in the civil domain.

The Napoli experience can be read through this sequence as a concrete example of one of the possible ways to manage the notion of commons in a city context. As a concrete case, as I

am writing this essay, a new political party is being born from the experience of the 'freed spaces' and the activism in the city.⁶ Starting from the urban laboratories, nowadays an extended transversal group composed of the creative precariat, activists from the political unions, left-wing parties, and so on, has created a new political party 'Potere al Popolo' (Power to the People) which is stepping into the national political arena following the national elections, which took place on 4 March 2018.

Today, the city of Naples is under threat of bankruptcy and compulsory administration. A huge debate about the presence of baby-gangs crafted on the style of the TV-series *Gomorra* (inspired by the award-winning book by Roberto Saviano) is on all the frontpages of the national newspapers, while the public health system and the public transport are on the verge of collapse. In a recent TV report presented by one of the best-watched national TV programmes (*Presa Diretta*), Naples is declared one of the worst cities to live in in the south of Italy.

At the same time, we are seeing an important presence of tourists in the city, B&Bs, new hotels that are built and with all this, new forms of deregulated gentrification are taking place. It is also a wonderful time for the cinema and the art scene, and forms of urban regeneration are pursued by private cultural organizations, while gallery owners and designers fight to overcome the risk of the control of the territory by a diffused micro-criminality. The 'Declaration of the Urban and Civic and Collective use' and the 'Communal Acts' are being presented in various arenas and are becoming a possible model for other cities in the Italian and European contexts. In 2017, the city council was honoured by the European programme Urbact for its innovative administrative action in fostering collective participation for the recovery of abandoned property.

Where are all these experiences leading us? Are the commons a new political path towards a 'cosmopolitan form of democracy', to borrow Held's words?

How this form may be sustainable in the long run for artists, citizens, and institutions is still a matter of debate and further analysis. These processes need to be observed under both local and global lenses and in a sustainable perspective. The role of the arts and of the extended creative precariat is introducing a new path, a form linked to a new way of being together, socializing values and economies in a world that is moving towards a post-global

dimension and is under attack from new forms of localism and populism. A world that needs beauty to overcome the fear of otherness and of the private use of common sources.

As Hardt and Negri (2009) suggested, guaranteeing the commons is necessary to safeguard future cultural production. We may add that safeguarding the cultural production can bring us towards new aesthetics that are the result of civil processes that represent the multitude of singularities that our cities represent.

Notes

- 1 For more info see: Bianca De Fazio and Conchita Sannino, 'Sotto accusa De Fusco: Un contratto d'oro', *La Repubblica* (ed. Napoli), 15 July 2015; Bianca De Fazio, 'Assunzioni al Teatro Festival: La Miraglia sotto accusa', *La Repubblica* (ed. Napoli), 4 May 2011.
- 2 Nowadays, in Naples the agency who manages the water (ABC Acqua Bene Comune) is a common good.
- 3 In: Stefano Rodotà, 'Il valore dei beni comuni', *La Repubblica*, 5 January 2012.
- 4 These *tavoli di lavoro* are workgroups that focus on specific topics.
- 5 For more information: <https://bando2017.culturability.org>.

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