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## **The silenced paradoxes of urban renewal: morality, welfare reconfiguration and precarious labour in Collective Food Procurement in Turin**

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### **Citation**

Vasile, M. (2023, September 6). *The silenced paradoxes of urban renewal: morality, welfare reconfiguration and precarious labour in Collective Food Procurement in Turin*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3638588>

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## **Chapter II. Appropriate garden(er)s**

As I started to engage in the land rehabilitation works at the park Piemonte, I met many volunteers who came there once or twice a week and dedicated their energies to the Orti Generali project for several reasons. At the time (winter 2019), these were mainly youngsters and retirees, mostly men. The gender composition of the group of volunteers however changed over time and in relation to the tasks, and more women started to partake in the initiative as the end of cleaning and construction works gave way to gardening activities. New gardeners also started to arrive in March 2019 when the individual allotments were ready to be rented. Some of them also contributed to the continuation of the works and to the development of the collective gardening areas (while others only worked on their individual plots). In this chapter, I share insights on the ways in which the land rehabilitation and volunteer work took shape at the park and how this process can be regarded as an example of non-expert citizens engagement in urban transformation (Newman 2015; 2020). At Orti Generali, volunteering emerged as a key form of civic engagement: it was therefore privileged arena to delve into volunteers' individual motivations as well as the moral premises that banded together their visions and experiences. I reveal a connection between urban renewal and forms of civic engagement considered as appropriate. At the same time, I problematise the extent to which volunteers, gardeners and local inhabitants were involved in different levels of decision making and explain how some diverging visions and confrontations were silenced. I report on the disconnections that emerged between the rules, agenda and approach of the project organisers and the needs of some gardeners.

### **Networks of volunteers**

#### **Orti Generali in the set-up phase: volunteers' work and motivations**

On a cold but sunny day, late January 2019, I got at the park around 9h30. Likewise, other volunteers progressively arrived, covered with their winter jackets and working shoes. I had also got one

pair of working shoes after running the risk of injuring myself a few days earlier, while we were moving around heavy wood and metal waste found in the area. The first task of that day was to work in the lower part of the park, close to the Sangone river and clean a specific seemingly empty area, which it was discovered to be “full of shit”, according to one of the volunteers who had been working there in the previous days. We were provided with gloves (some volunteers already had their own) and start removing all sorts of material from the ground: pieces of glass, metal, plastic. They all surfaced as we move the soil. We also found car wheels, a washing machine buried in the ground, an iron table. We managed to remove most of what we found in that first section of that area and to separate this waste in big piles, according to the type of material. Matteo announced that the rest of that angle would remain uncleared because there were too many things that we could not remove by hand. That was where they would draw the spatial boundaries of the project and plant fences.

The volunteers and the project organisers Stefano and Matteo collaborated in the definition of tasks, steps and procedures. As later explained by Matteo, volunteers were fundamental to achieve the final results and the timely opening of the gardens, and him and Stefano had worked to identify their different skills and channel them productively:

I learned from Stefano how to identify people’s skills and how to valorise them, not only on a practical level but also in terms of mediation and building relationships. We [workers of the organisation] were few and always needed to rely on others [...] and asking them things became a particularly important thing and, even before that, understanding what they were capable of.<sup>25</sup>

On some occasions, volunteers’ skills and expertise had revealed themselves crucial for the continuation of the works. This was the case of hobbyist carpenters, smiths or former construction workers who gave a hand and always had their say, co-directing works together with Stefano and Matteo. Going beyond Orti Generali, volunteering was a

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<sup>25</sup> Matteo Baldo, interview, 25/05/2020.



[Image 5: volunteers attempting to remove a washing machine from the ground. 21/01/2019. Photo by the author.]

widespread phenomenon in my fieldwork's sites as well as a theme which is discussed in the literature on contemporary transformations of civic engagement (e.g. Hyatt 2001; Rozakou, 2016) and the development of the "postwelfarist public morality" (Muehlebach 2012, 7; Pusceddu 2020) in the Italian context and beyond. While I will discuss the theme of volunteering from different angles in all the chapters of this dissertation, I focus here on its linkages with urban renewal: who were the volunteers actively engaged in the transformation of the area? Based on which (moral) premises did they get involved in the redefinition of this area and its scope?

As discussed by Hyatt (2001) based on her reflections on the social organisation of impoverished communities, in the context of welfare state retrenchment and urban deprivation, the relational skills of local inhabitants are particularly important. They become active agents of transformation having and being incentivised to provide for themselves and people around them. Hyatt (2001) argues that neoliberal governance builds on "making volunteerism an *obligation* of citizenship for the working and middle classes" (228). In a similar way, Muehlebach (2012)'s analysis of the Italian voluntary sector shows how it can become a widespread moral standard. In the context of Orti Generali, the volunteers came from diverse backgrounds, especially in terms of previous participation in volunteering and community activities in the area. For some, this was their first experience and they were there mostly out of individual interest. For example, this was the case of the volunteer Maria, a nurse in her sixties, with a passion for gardening. She had learned to farm from her father and had always enjoyed it. Since she arrived at Orti Generali she took care of many collective gardening tasks, volunteering regularly (once or twice a week) despite her hard-working life<sup>26</sup>. For others, volunteering at the park was linked to their broader involvement in volunteering activities in the neighbourhood. This was the case of several people varying from Loredana, a local retiree active in many

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<sup>26</sup> Maria Carnà, gardener and volunteer at Orti Generali, interview, 16/10/2019.

groups in the area<sup>27</sup>, to Fabio, a youngster who had grown up in Mirafiori Sud, was now unemployed, interested in urban agriculture and enthusiastic about the idea of working voluntarily for the improvement of the area, together with people whom he appreciated<sup>28</sup>. Some of the volunteers who had grown up in Mirafiori Sud were also moved by memories of their childhood and an attachment to the history of their neighbourhood: Loredana, for example, liked to recall how, in the fifties, her parents used to spend their leisure time around the Sangone river. Between the 1930s and 1960s – before the river was considered too polluted – this was the case of many working-class families who could not afford to go to the seaside (FIAB 2018)<sup>29</sup>.



[Image 6: “My parents on a boat on the Sangone river”. n.d. Courtesy of Loredana Vecchi.]

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<sup>27</sup> Loredana Vecchi, gardener and volunteer at Orti Generali, interview, 12/03/2019.

<sup>28</sup> Fabio Giraudi, volunteer at Orti Generali, interview, 18/02/2019.

<sup>29</sup> Loredana also introduced me to the song *Sangon Blues* (1965) by Gipo Farassino. It narrates the romances of a young factory worker which spends an afternoon on the popular Sangone riverbanks.

## Volunteering as a model of urban renewal and sociality

Davide and Felice were two volunteers whom I met in January 2019. Davide - who later became for a couple of years an employee at Orti Generali - was a young inhabitant of Mirafiori Sud. Chemist, he was doing a civil service program within a social agricultural cooperative. He had joined the project already since a few months as he had heard about the renewal of the area: he had liked the idea and joined the weekly cleaning activities<sup>30</sup>. Felice was also from the neighbourhood. He was retired and used to work as a computer scientist. As I told him about the research, he explained that he was volunteering within different projects in the area, including the ecomuseum of Mirafiori<sup>31</sup>. I also noticed that he was wearing the jacket of Turin 2006's Olympic games: a grey jacket, with the sign of the Olympics on the back above which it was written "Torino 2006".

The jacket had been given to many of the city inhabitants who had worked voluntarily during the Olympic games: 41 thousand candidates, among which 21 thousand recruited as volunteers (Ghera and Rolandi 2016). The Olympic games are to be contextualised as part of a series of large-scale events hosted in Turin, which are still ongoing today (e.g. national book fairs, international music contests) and which are often discussed as the vehicle to a new identity for the

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<sup>30</sup> Davide Di Nasso, volunteer later employee at Orti Generali, interview, 07/08/2019.

<sup>31</sup> A few days later, on January 30, I was invited by Felice to participate to a presentation of the ecomuseum at the community centre *Cascina Roccafranca*. The ecomuseum was defined during the presentation as "a pact with which a community commits itself to taking care of a territory" (based on the work of Hugues de Varine). At the *Cascina Roccafranca* this translated into the creation of a space where different types of documentation related to the history of the neighbourhood and its people (maps, printed material like testimonies, photos, books, often donated by local inhabitants) were collected. It is, they explained, a "museum of the people" (*museo popolare*) namely a museum that should be full of people and not of collections. The concept is linked to the protection of an area (the neighbourhood in this case), composed of 'the marks that its inhabitants have left from the past'. See also Grasseni (2010).



city (Morbello 2022). While these are praised as opportunities to relaunch Turin's image and role in the European scenario, they often entail a reorganisation of the urban space and a series of public expenses which do not benefit its urban dwellers and appear inappropriate in the context of austerity and lack of long-term responses to local needs (Morbello 2022). Moreover, the economic impact of such large-scale events is often not benefitting the local population as exemplified, among other, by the widespread use of unremunerated labour through the recruitment of volunteers. As recalled by Antonella, one of my research participants, who critically analysed the winter jacket as an emblem of contemporary transformations of civic engagement and its depoliticization:

There was this glorification of the role of the volunteer: they were giving them the winter jacket. People were really proud of having this jacket with the symbol of the Olympics like if it was a big social prestige. I think that the message was really wrong because in that occasion many people got richer and retirees and youngsters were exploited, exploited as volunteers.<sup>32</sup>

As argued by Antonella, in these contexts, volunteering appears as a way to reinforce inequalities: while some consolidated businesses benefited from arrivals of international staff and tourists such as the hotels, not many new working opportunities (as also more recently debated in relation to the Eurovision contest see, for example, Sistema Torino 2022) nor long-term benefits in terms of the rearrangement of the urban space were created. On the contrary, several areas developed for the Olympics such as the housing facilities ex Moi were left completely abandoned.

More generally, such big event was surely a turning point in the volunteering culture of the city: volunteering remained a central theme, the most recurrent form of civic engagement, a practice and narrative often mobilised by the local administration and non-profit organisations for the implementation of plans and projects in the city.

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<sup>32</sup> Antonella - a pseudonym, member of the Popular Purchasing Group (*Gruppo di Acquisto Popolare*) *La Poderosa*, group interview, 27/02/2019.



Similarly to the Greek case analysed by Rozakou (2016), the institutionalisation and professionalisation of volunteering can be analysed as a local institutions' "attempt to regulate public sociality" (96) following rules and hierarchies that differ from the informal models of sociality. Such process is to be understood as part of ongoing socio-economic transformations, narratives of modernisation and not "merely top-down initiatives nor fixed projects, but rather grassroots and works-in progress" (Rozakou 2016, 81).

At the level of the park and its transformation, the case Felice also spoke of the collaboration between local non-profit organisations and the ways in which they were interconnected by a network of resources, including the volunteers. These volunteers travelled across different projects, moved by the importance of participating to local renewal and by a set of ideas and values, such as being active and helping others. As explained by Muehlebach (2012), these values become functional to neoliberal governance while coexisting well with ideas typically inherent to Catholicism and the Left. United by these moral values, by participating to Orti Generali, volunteers often became part of a broader network of social care in the area, which gave a higher moral stand to their contribution and to the project itself, going beyond the redevelopment of the park and forwarding the idea that non-profit organisations joined forces to systematise their activities.

At the Parco Piemonte, the act of cleaning became a way to analyse more in depth some of the moral premises of volunteering and their entanglement with urban renewal. On that same day of January, after a coffee break, we were asked to clean another area, which was formerly occupied and cultivated by two spontaneous gardeners, originally from Romania, it was said. Like other gardeners, they had been cultivating their plot in the Parco Piemonte for the past years. They had abandoned it when learning that the area was going to be transformed into an official urban gardening space. I felt a bit like an intruder, undoing the work of others, as I removed from the ground the different sticks and canes put by these gardeners to grow tomatoes, peppers and chilly – we guessed, while observing the dried plants leaning on the soil. It seemed like they were well organised: we discovered different tools and water collection containers that we were asked to dismantle. I learned from Matteo that only two of the former gardeners of the area

had decided to stay. After winning the land concession, the association had talked to most of these spontaneous gardeners, proposing them to remain and keep their garden, under the condition of removing the unused material they had accumulated and remaining open to collaborations, such as opening their gardens to educational or therapeutic activities to be conducted with schools and external visitors. While I will expand on the practices of spontaneous gardeners in the next chapter - where I explain how contemporary visions of urban renewal and cleanness *de facto* excluded other visions of gardening – what I want to point out here is how cleaning became a shared responsibility and a process through which the distinctions between the appropriate and inappropriate urban spaces and citizens were underlined.

The land rehabilitation process was in fact a phase which created consensus between volunteers and project organisers, making them work together and allowing all to be part of planning's everyday decision-making processes. Volunteers were directly engaged in the definition of renewal which meant deciding on a daily basis what to remove, what to leave unchanged, what to throw away and what to keep for possible reuse. The project organisers, Matteo and Stefano, were open to volunteers' suggestions and had to revise their plans also based on unexpected constraints. As also highlighted by Herzfeld (2020) building on his fieldwork in Rome and Bangkok, the work of planners is mostly of social nature: "while they attempt to fix spatial relations for all eternity, the spaces they design become sites for negotiations, compromise, and even, sometimes, radical change" (20). The general consensus on how to proceed was based on shared principles around cleaning and the ideas of restoring decorum as well as "giving back" the public space to themselves and others. The area was depicted as an area that had been for long left in a situation of decay. As explained in detail in the introduction, since several years, this term is widely spread in the Italian public debate in relation to the ways in which city spaces can be left abandoned or misused (e.g. Pisanello 2017) and discussions around several areas of Mirafiori Sud made no exception. In the context of the park, decay was also associated to the practices of its previous occupants and the spontaneous gardeners. As discussed by Barchetta (2021), such visions

around urban nature's decay in Turin often correspond to stigmas about specific areas, which are usually known very little.

The usage of the notion of decay by the volunteers at the park often supported argumentations around blaming and responsibility of citizens and the local administration. As discussed by Pusceddu (2020), in his research with volunteers involved in food aid distribution in the south of Italy - which I will come back to in the last chapters -, volunteers can have conflicting visions of the state, their role and the ways in which they make sense of it in the context of economic crisis and welfare transformation. While the volunteers at Parco Piemonte were also moved by a variety of individual interests, the land rehabilitation process was premised on a shared understanding of the limited capability of intervention of the municipality and the idea of responsibility of individual citizens to look after their city space and contribute directly to its decorum and transformation. These particular civic values and narratives about the city transformation, its cleanliness and decorum, were directly associated with the work of volunteers and the (re)production of moral figures among which the "concerned planner", the "good citizen" working voluntarily, as well as the "illegal gardeners", whose practices were cancelled and relegated to the realm of the past. Such understanding of the good citizen constitutes an important component of neoliberal public morality as it reflects a vision of civic participation as part of which the work of the volunteer is separated from reflections on broader socio-political phenomena in the city and its inhabitants' needs for services and is thus rooted in a depoliticized conception of solidarity action. In the next section, I also show why, in this framework, the ideas of participation and co-planning have limited extents. I discuss the limitations of the idea of blurring boundaries between planners and users as I present how volunteers and gardeners at Orti Generali had limited involvement in decision-making processes (especially once the project fully started).

## **New rules and silenced confrontations**

### **New urban gardens as “controlled spaces”? Aesthetics versus shared decision-making**

Mid-March 2019. The volunteers and future gardeners Olivier, Alessio, Fabio and I were finishing some small works in the grassland area. The cultivation in the new individual allotments had started since a few days and everything was still very much in transformation. As we talked, we started imagining how the gardens would look like as they further developed. Alessio and Olivier had already been allocated their respective plot and, as we worked to fix some wood fences, they shared ideas about what to implement in their own gardens. Alessio mentioned that he was told that all gardens should be sharing a sort of aesthetic “homogeneity”. It was the first time that I heard about such regulation and asked what this would entail more specifically. “No plastic nets, no motored tools, no manure, nothing higher than 1.70 meters...”: Alessio and the others spoke out a list of don’ts that would soon become part of the official regulations of Orti Generali. Some of these were known to all of them, others sounded surprising for most of us. “What about my pergola?” asked Olivier, hinting to the 1.70 meters restriction. Alessio added to Olivier’s complain by explaining that he did not like the greenhouse prototype that had been chosen by the managers of the project. “It is invasive, it will look like a camp” he criticised. From where we were, we could see the prototype standing several meters in front of us: rectangular, with a wooden structure and a large semi-transparent plastic tarpaulin. Alessio further explained that he was going to suggest a different model, but he was not sure that his proposal was going to be accepted. He took his phone out of his pocket and showed me an online photo of a different greenhouse model, which he wanted to try to develop at home, as he was a hobbyist woodworker. The conversation continued and words such as “prototype”, “pattern”, “standard” were debated. On one side, Fabio agreed that allotments should appear in “good order”, thus share similarities and patterns, to be visible to the eyes of people passing by. On the other, Olivier found still unclear which were the actual prohibitions: at the time, not all were written in the contracts. Both of us argued that these could be better discussed and decided jointly together with the future gardeners.

This was not the first time that I was exposed to the idea that the project's efforts for homogeneity and aesthetics could contrast with the ways of doing of some gardeners and, in a way, could limit their possibilities. However, I was assisting to a first clear expression of dissent, which had not emerged in the first phase of collective works and land rehabilitation. As previously discussed, that period was indeed characterised by a sort of unity, linked to the fact that the focus of most activities and discussions was cleaning and transformation, rather than creating and envisioning. But as the new project was taking shape, the different visions about what gardening sustainably or a beautiful garden actually signifies emerged. This resulted in a re-evaluation on the side of the project managers of how and to what extent decision could be taken within open and participated discussions. When informally discussing it with Matteo, I asked if they thought that it would be a good idea to have some collective discussion moments, gathering volunteers and gardeners, and talking over and defining some of these decisions together. Matteo answered that he would talk about it with Stefano but added that they did not necessarily think that this was clever. He explained that the risk of such consultations was that people would then have the expectation to obtain everything that they had voiced. I was also told that there were too many people to be engaged and that shared decision-making processes were too complicated to be managed. I argue that such approach to decision-making resulted in rather paternalistic behaviours, the reinforcement of hierarchies and that it should be critically analysed in relation to questions around democratic processes, spatial justice and dispossession from public land.

My analysis builds on anthropological and geographical literature on urban gardening which critically discusses the theme of civic engagement and the ways in which it can be related to neoliberal urbanism, power relations and new ways of constructing notions of citizenship (e.g. Newman 2015; Eizenberg 2012; Crossan *et al.* 2016). As part of this set of literature, Ghose and Pettigrove (2014), who investigated community gardens in Wisconsin (US), argued that urban gardens are to be regarded as spaces of citizenship that both oppose and reinforce local neoliberal policies. The authors pointed, for example, to the mechanisms that might exclude from participation and decision-making local inhabitants who lack economic and social

capital or who do not “produce space conforming to government specifications” (1109). On the other hand, while acknowledging the many linkages between neoliberal city agendas and urban gardening project today, authors such as Crossan *et al.* (2016) and Bródy and de Wilde (2020) counterargued with examples that nuance such entanglements between civic participation, neoliberalism and urban gardens. Crossan *et al.* (2016) uses the concept of “Do-It-Yourself (DIY) citizenship” to explore the ways in which counter-hegemonic practices might emerge in these spaces. In their article *Cultivating food or cultivating citizens?* Bródy and de Wilde (2020), anthropologists who looked at 19 community gardening projects in Amsterdam, compared gardens managed differently to describe the variety of relations between gardeners and governing actors which at times impair and other enable civic participation and social inclusion.

Similarly to the idea of gardens as “controlled spaces” (Eizenberg 2012), I argue that these discussions at Orti Generali correspond to entry points to problematise the extent to which urban gardens can represent spaces for participatory practices, democratic discussion and a collective production of space. This case is also relevant to highlight the ways in which the management of a non-profit organisation can silence the clashes between different visions of urban public space and discussions around the actual meaning of renewal and sustainability. I argue that Orti Generali only rarely became a site of open contestation and that conflicts remain silenced in the name of the responsible “expert eyes” (Grasseni 2007, 7) and aesthetic standards of the project organisers. The aesthetic standards also reveal how the gardens have functions that go beyond its use by gardeners and local population: it is also a place of display and branding of a particular model of urban agriculture, a space for the “aesthetic consumption” of the city (Guano, 2020; see also Vasile and Grasseni 2020). As pointed out by Guano in relation to the city of Genoa, aesthetic was for a long time specifically associated to the city centre of most Italian cities, in relation to heritage sites for example, while the post-industrial urban peripheries were left to concrete constructions and utilitarian purposes, “often defined as *quartieri dormitorio* [dorm neighbourhoods] and *nonuoghi* [non-places] in the Italian public sphere” (2). As part of the multiple efforts to apparently redirect these trends, while not necessarily breaking the “uneven distribution of resources and

externalities” (Guano 2020, 2) at their basis, greening became a central political narrative. As discussed by Newman (2015, xv), this can be regarded as “a green turn in urban policy, planning, and design that is swiftly becoming ensconced as a global orthodoxy guiding the ways cities are being built, reimagined, and inhabited”. As reviewed by Barchetta (2016), it is because of the multiple economic and urban planning agendas behind greening project that these can have a variety of outcomes in terms of social and environmental justice, from new amenities to green gentrification.

### **Communicating out, not communicating in: conflicting visions and silenced confrontations within Orti Generali**

In the setting up of their activities, Orti Generali’s organisers Matteo and Stefano gave and exhibited a great attention to collaborations, but also to the ideas of openness, inclusivity and education, front staged through several of the initiatives being organised. This was the case of artistic seminars, collective cooking activities, screenings of queer short movies, to name a few. An example in this sense was also the so called *Social Passata* (social tomatoes sauce), an event of collective preparation of tomato sauce to which Orti Generali participated in September 2019. This was organised at Mirafiori Sud community centre by a series of local organisations including Mirafiori Community Foundation and Slow Food<sup>33</sup>. This event also inaugurated the official entitlement of the neighbourhood as a Slow Food Urban Community, called *Mirafood*.

*Mirafood* did not add to the existing activities but was a way to frame and present a new image of the area, gathering the many food production, collection and distribution activities developing in the area under a same umbrella. Orti Generali contributed to the organisation of the event by inviting gardeners to join the cooking activities and bring their tomatoes. However, after the event some of them told me that they had felt somehow out of place: these gardeners were unsure about

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<sup>33</sup> Slow Food is a global organisation founded in Italy in 1986 by Carlo Petrini and other activists wanting to defend local food and culinary traditions (Slow Food, n.d.). See also Siniscalchi (2022).





[Image 7: detail of the leaflet of the event. “Mirafood Together Tomato. The first Slow Food urban community is in Mirafiori Torino”.]

the tomatoes which had actually ended up in the sauce, they asked themselves whether they were all coming from the gardens or also from the supermarkets. Moreover, they were disappointed by the fact that they had to pay to participate. One of them also told me that he had felt unease while being photographed by upper class women coming for the occasion from the city centre. Such accounts are illustrative of a progressive feeling of disconnection between locals’ needs and desires and parts of the agenda and new collaborations sponsored by the project organisers, as experienced by some gardeners and volunteers.

Such feeling of estrangement is also discussed in Bourlessas *et al.* (2021) who examine food gentrification around Porta Palazzo in Turin. While I will engage more with their work in the next part of the dissertation, particularly relevant here is the idea that such food events and new food spaces can create a “displacement atmosphere” (Bourlessas *et al.* 2021) deriving from middle-class restructuring of local spaces and, I add, practices. In this case, I relate the notion of “displacement atmosphere” with the incorporation of a normal local

practice such as the making of tomato sauce to a distinctive phenomenon, to be in a way commodified and showcased city-wide. At the same time in which such events started to flourish, while being seemingly unaddressed, questions around decision-making processes and the construction of democratic spaces of engagement therefore appeared to me as an increasingly central topic. Who took these new decisions, based on which premises and what if some divergences arose?

I could find some answers to these questions when I was asked by Stefano and Matteo to support them in the resolution of a conflict with the volunteer and gardener Olivier. The core of the conflict lied in their different approach to sustainability: while Olivier envisioned a wilder approach to the reorganisation of the area - very much inspired from concepts of permaculture and the principle of “letting nature do” - Stefano dedicated a great importance to the aesthetic dimensions of beauty and neatness of the landscape (*dimensione paesaggistica*). His vision was particularly influenced by his formation as landscape architect at the National School of Landscape Architecture of Versailles (*École Nationale Supérieure de Paysage de Versailles*). Olivier – a man of Belgian origins in his fifties living in Mirafiori Sud since several years - used to have a spontaneous allotment before arriving at Parco Piemonte: “this was part of my socio-economic integration in the Italian society!”, he joked<sup>34</sup>. He was part of the volunteers of Orti Generali since the beginning of the land rehabilitation and construction works, dedicating to it much of his time and efforts. As he explained during an interview, Olivier saw this project as a possibility to collectively experiment and share knowledge, especially in relation to adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, topics which he regularly brought to the table:

Very soon we will see what works and what does not, what is valid and what is not. Will the irrigation system work? [...]. Then we will learn all together: some gardens will work, some will not at all. And maybe there will be students coming “why are you doing things? How is this working?”. What I want to

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<sup>34</sup> Olivier Fontaine, gardener, interview, 07/03/2019.

say is that we need places like this one. I am here rather for this than for growing carrots.<sup>35</sup>

Olivier and Stefano's different visions came out in several occasions, especially in relation to practical issues linked to the management and well-being of animals and to the collective garden. In October 2019, Olivier had the impression that his work was not being respected ("they undo what I do", he explained) arguing that he had thought that there would be much more space for experimentation and proposals for "really sustainable actions" such as avoiding completely the use of fuel motored grass trimmer. On the other side, Orti Generali was asking him to take a step back, arguing that his involvement and predominant behaviour was leaving little space for others to use the space and his ideas were too "radical" to be taken up in this project<sup>36</sup>.

### **Justifying the lack of participatory decision making in the name of progress and cultural divide**

As I accompanied meetings and dialogue between them, I was repeatedly told by Stefano that the ideas and propositions of the volunteers and gardeners were always welcome, as far as these would remain within the margins of the broader decisions taken by them, the project managers. I was illustrated how they had been researching, imagining and planning alternative land use for the area for more than a decade. According to him, this made them experts with an overall vision of the desired transformation, which could not be completely challenged or rethought at this stage. During a conversation, he explained:

I believe that it should be us to provide solutions, as we have the knowledge linked to our training path. [...] With Miraorti we got to know the neighbourhood but now we have become an implementation project, a subject who offers a service, a

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<sup>35</sup> Olivier Fontaine, interview, 07/03/ 2019.

<sup>36</sup> Fieldnotes, 25/09/2019.

model of enterprise. [...] [It is also a matter of] valorisation of our role and a sense of responsibility.<sup>37</sup>

This discussion was particularly telling of the new visions and definitions that the organisers of Orti Generali brought to the area, which I regard as actually it's most significant transformation: the fact of bringing in a narrative about what that space should look like and how it should work sustainably, as a modern enterprise. In such circumstances, the boundary between planners and users were stressed based on knowledge difference of the people engaged in the project. Only some of this knowledge was regarded as more or less pertinent in relation to the vision of the project organisers, which partly drew on and had to fit within globalised ideas of sustainable urban greening. From this perspective, the words of Stefano are exemplificatory of the "hierarchy of value" (Herzfeld, 2004) that can be embedded in the development of such sustainability projects. This concept, as developed by Herzfeld (2004) in his analysis of the heritage industry in Greece, is useful here to think of how common sense around good greening practices is based on often invisible struggles and competition for meanings. As argued by the author:

the rhetoric of the global hierarchy of value is perhaps a more subtle kind of globalisation than that of companies logos and fast food. It is, after all, not obviously associated with specific interests. It is not always immediately visible to us because, having invaded local universes of common sense ("local worlds") it creates the sense of universal commonality. This is a common sense that is no less cultural than the local versions it appears to supplant but that, for reasons of scale and power, is better equipped to hide that contingency and so to make itself completely invisible (3-4).

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<sup>37</sup> Fieldnotes, 26/09/2019. Original text: *Credo che dobbiamo essere noi a fornire soluzioni, visto che abbiamo dei saperi legati ai nostri percorsi di formazione. [...] Con Miraorti abbiamo conosciuto il quartiere ma ora siamo diventati un progetto attuativo, un soggetto che offre un servizio, un modello di impresa. [...] [È anche una questione di] valorizzazione del nostro ruolo e un senso di responsabilità.*

Such linkages between common sense, value and power relations are important to reflect on practices of sustainability and urban renewal in Turin, and the (limited) extent to which the meaning of these practices is being discussed with the local population. The case of Orti Generali's new rules and internal conflict raises questions on the ways in which renewal is forwarded and of the democratic debate at their basis. While some contemporary anthropologists nuanced and problematised a dichotomic understanding of the urban planners and users divide (Newman 2015; Herzfeld 2020), I argue that the rules and internal conflicts described above recall the importance of keeping into the discussion the presumed cultural divide that is mobilised to silence or give voice to specific understandings of urban agriculture and renewal. A divide that is often unspoken and implies that certain understandings of high culture (e.g. expert planning, landscape architecture) make some proposals valued more than other, grassroots ones, before these are even discussed in detail. Olivier's ideas of the urban green, while based on agriculture and meteorology knowledge, were deemed inappropriate and simply never discussed with the rest of the group. Olivier continued to raise some questions in the following months and, while being criticised and isolated, for a while his criticisms coexisted with the approach of the garden organisers. However, these remained confined to a small circle of persons with whom he continued to share his thoughts.

More generally, the limitations set by the garden organisers Matteo and Stefano and the lack of participatory decision-making was justified in the name of their expertise, their cultural capital and ability to better understand what could be deemed as appropriate. In fact, Stefano and Matteo never said that they would include all requests in the development of the project, despite their initial peer to peer collaboration with the volunteers and their use of participatory language (which was opening the way to a more participatory forms of involvement of the local population). As explained in other studies on urban gardens managed by non-profit organisations such as Eizenberg (2012), organisers can take quite different approaches based on their visions of how a garden should be managed and what should be happening in it. This often results, however, in much broader impacts, as it is ultimately about the transformation of the meaning of public space and giving or bringing away opportunities for local inhabitants'

autonomy and ownership of such projects. Going back to what the Italian anthropologist Amalia Signorelli wrote already in 1989 in relation to the renewal of public housing estates, it is important to consider the cultural divide and power dynamics that always characterised the relation between planners and users. While today these seem to appear in a more tacit, hidden way (and keep coexisting with other forms of engagement, resistance and appropriation of spaces), urban areas such as Parco Piemonte still represent a “cultural connecting ground” (*terreno di contatto culturale*, Signorelli 1989, 13) between different cultures, visions and practices. In this perspective, it represents a peripheral space where “new references, values and symbols” (Signorelli 1989, 20) are brought to others in the name of progress.