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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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Part 3.

**Food aid, community care and the
reconfiguration of rights into needs.
Anthropology of welfare at the times of
COVID-19**

Introduction

This third and final part of the dissertation discusses institutional food aid during the COVID-19 crisis. In particular, it examines its premises, organisation, agents and representations. I analyse the case of the food aid hub which was developed at the Via Agliè community centre in the neighbourhood *Barriera di Milano*. The hub coordinated the distribution of food aid to up to 600 households in vulnerable socio-economic conditions living in northern Turin. From April to August 2020, I participated to the preparation of the food packages, working side by side with the many volunteers recruited.

I frame my analysis of this food aid hub as part of the anthropology of welfare, which, following Russel and Edgar (2003, 2) is concerned with “what welfare provision should entail, and where it should come from”. As also underlined by these authors, these are themes which are “intensely contested in most industrialized societies” (Russel and Edgar 2003, 2). This was particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which, in Italy, required a general mobilisation in the face of the growing needs of the population generated by or surfaced with the crisis. The lockdown measures and restrictions had important socio-economic consequences, impacting prominently the most vulnerable groups of the population (e.g. Conte 2020; Zaghi 2020). These consequences included the loss of employment, decreasing households’ economic means, food insecurity, disruption of social services, increasing social isolation and domestic violence, to name a few.

To analyse the nature and organisation of welfare that emerged in response to this socio-economic crisis, I build on the definition of welfare proposed by Porcellana (2020, 211, translation is my own):

Welfare is not an abstract concept but a mode through which societies, and therefore the people that compose them, incorporate and translate concretely meanings, values, ideas. Welfare can be described as the product of political and economic forces, of social structures and cultural norms at global, national and regional levels.

This definition invites for reflections on the values and ideas mediated by a given welfare system and highlights its social and cultural dimensions, which are at the core of my examination. More generally, I contextualise my analysis as part of the anthropology of welfare in Italy such as the recent volume edited by Rimoldi and Pozzi (2022), which discusses various forms of welfare including what is left of the Italian welfare state in the form of unemployment services and housing support. The volume also includes a chapter on the responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Milan (Grassi 2022). I follow the invitation of these anthropologists to investigate Italian welfare not necessarily to define it but to understand how it is operated – which discourses, processes and categories are taken for granted, which are marginalised – in a specific time and context.

The context of the crisis revealed (even more clearly) some of the assumptions and standards on which contemporary Italian welfare is premised. This was a moment in which the essential role of non-profit organisations in the management of urban social services became even more visible. As highlighted by Grassi (2022), while some have argued that COVID-19 has transformed societies, this is not true in terms of the continuity in the externalisation of public services. The COVID-19 crisis was also a privileged juncture to interrogate and problematise how and by whom the criteria to access (food) aid are defined in the context of welfare mix. In fact, as part of this arrangement, multiple agents are involved in the very definition and implementation of social interventions (Caselli 2015).

With this part of the dissertation, I propose to step back from the normalisation of the Italian welfare mix and the growing role of non-profit organisations in the delivery of social services. I advance a detailed investigation of the morality upon which it is premised and that it reproduces. As highlighted by Muehlebach (2012) – and mentioned already in previous sections of this dissertation –, the proliferation of a specific moral order became key to justify the lack of public interventions as well as the normalisation of volunteering and unremunerated labour, to name a few. Such morality clearly emerged in media narrations of the management of the COVID-19 crisis such as political discussions, newspaper articles but also post-produced international documentaries such as Piacenza (2021). I will discuss

this material in parallel to my direct accounts of institutionalised food aid practices and their contradictions.

Based on my participant observation in one of the official food aid hubs of Turin, I follow the invitation of Russel and Edgar (2003) and Rimoldi and Pozzi (2022) to discuss some of the configurations that the language, social organisation, culture of welfare might take. I want to connect these issues to the rest of the dissertation by firstly proposing an historical introduction to the space where the food hub developed (chapter VI). Again, I want to highlight the importance of connecting an analysis of practices to one of space, to reveal how visions of specific urban areas and their (ideal) inhabitants are co-constructed, for example through the local conceptualisation of community care. To explain the construction of community care in the neighbourhood *Barriera di Milano*, I retrace the genealogy of the *Via Agliè* community centre – where the food aid hub was based. I highlight its progressive transformation into an “urban assembler” (Koster and van Leynseele, 2018) of local institution, associations and citizens, and into an active promoter of the “postwelfarist morality” (Muehlebach 2012). Such diachronic analysis of welfare is important to unpack the social and cultural features that brought to a specific set of responses during the pandemic (Porcellana 2020; Rimoldi and Pozzi 2022). Chapter VI also introduce the forms of solidarity that emerged during COVID-19, explaining the diverse types of responses to urban poverty and food insecurity that were put in place.

Chapter VII is more ethnographic and discusses the functioning of the food aid hub of *Via Agliè*, delving into the description of its materiality such as the food managed and distributed. I discuss decision-making around how to compose the packages, highlighting the role of morality in these processes and the ways in which food aid can reproduce a stratification of citizenship. To do so, throughout the text, I also compare this food aid system with the grassroots free food distribution initiative *Rete Zona Aurora Solidale* (also called *SOSpesa*), to which I also participated. This second initiative allowed me to take a step back from the everyday way of doing at *Via Agliè*. Moreover, I present the perspectives of volunteers at *Via Agliè* and highlight how their more critical and political reflections remained silenced - similarly as in the case of *Orti Generali* (part I). Based on

my observations and interviews, I problematise how the figures of the volunteer and the food recipient were constructed through internal and external accounts of the hub's activities, referring to and extending previous discussions around the concept of deservingness. I conclude with an analysis of the evolution of the organisation of food aid at Via Agliè over time and the changing levels of intervention of the municipality.