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

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Chapter VII. The materiality and morality of food aid

April 2nd 2020 was my first day as a volunteer and the official starting day of the food aid related activities at the community centre. On my shift, we were around six volunteers, working at the composition of food packages under the supervision of Hakima, one of the employees of the community centre, a friendly and resourceful woman of Moroccan origins in her thirties. Several pallets and cardboards containing dry food had already been delivered: all of them had been stocked in big piles at the back of the courtyard of the centre. On some boxes one could read about the provenance of the products, such as "EU FEAD" or "*Banco Alimentare* (food bank) - donations collected at supermarkets".

We started by reorganising the courtyard to create a line of several tables where to put the boxes. We debated on which was the fastest way to compose the packages and we started by dividing ourselves according to the specific food items which we would oversee. I was firstly responsible for putting one or more long-life milk cartons in each package, based on the number of household members. As we realised that this was not really working out, we divided the packages on different tables, based on whether they were being composed for households of one to three, four or more members. This also meant a new division of tasks as each one of us would be responsible for composing complete packages for a specific set of households. I was taking care of all packages for households formed by one to two people.

[Images 33a and 33b. The making of food aid packages and the food stock. Courtyard of the Via Agliè community centre. 02/04/2020. Photo by the author.]

Meanwhile, Hakima was struggling to get the most updated list of food recipients. She wanted to print out a complete list but had to work around different excel files composed by other local organisations such as parishes and religious groups, non-profit organisations working with immigrant population and associations specialised in assisting youth or women victims of violence. These structures had flagged up vulnerable households and their lists were the first way to reach people in need. In addition to the people on these lists, the requests gathered by the official COVID19 emergency helpline of the civil protection were starting to arrive. As that seemed too complicated to handle on the spot, Hakima ultimately decided that our shift would prepare the first hundred packages only. She explained that she would find a solution during the lunch break and prepare a new list for the shift of volunteers arriving in the afternoon.

As we did not have enough boxes for a hundred packages, Hakima sent me together with one of the other volunteers to the nearby market

of Piazza Foroni to collect and bring back more wooden or plastic boxes. These are normally found on the floor of the market square as vendors use them to transport products and then throw most of them away at the end of their market day. The five minutes' walk towards the market gave the volunteer and I the time to better introduce ourselves: Eric, originally from Peru, had been living in Italy for the past ten years.

When we arrived at the market, policemen and security guards were surveying its entrances and limiting the number of people that were allowed to circulate on the market square at the same time. This was part of the corona restrictive measures aimed at avoiding mass gatherings (*assembramenti*). We were able to skip the queue as Eric explained to the guard that we were part of a group of volunteers preparing food aid packages. Quickly, we went in and crossed the market which, despite the circumstances, was quite lively. We reached the corner where the boxes were usually gathered, close to the garbage containers. Eric decided that we would bond some of these together, to transport them more easily. He tied together plastic bags found on the ground creating a long string that could pass all around a tall pile of boxes. We did so for two piles and we carried them back to the community centre.

This day of activities was revealing of the many challenges and arrangements needed to set up the food aid hub. This was the first time for both the community centre employees and the volunteers, who had no prior guidance on how to proceed. As I will further elaborate in this chapter, the management of food aid became for the group a learning process made of improvisation, experimentation and readjustments. While the work of the volunteers became progressively more organised, elements of discontinuity and improvisation remained, such as needing to deal with unstable food supply and a growing number of requests for food aid. That day also introduced me to the degree of discretion that was left to the centre employees and volunteers. Such discretion was partly revealed by the different answers given to questions such as how much food to put in the packages? How to assess the appropriate quantity for an entire household for a week? If we are generous with the quantities put in the current packages, will we have enough for the remaining households? Which specific food

requests can we consider, and do we have enough time to compose differentiated packages?

To discuss the materiality and morality at the basis of this welfare configuration, I link anthropological theory on welfare to other specific set of literature. I connect my analysis to international critiques of food banks (e.g. Riches and Silvasti 2014), to the theme of morality and volunteerism in Italy (e.g. Muehlebach 2012; Pusceddu 2020) and the analysis of contemporary depoliticization of social issues in the context of austerity (e.g. Capello 2019; Palazzi 2021). While I will interact with this literature in detail in the next sections, it is important to contextualise my critical examination of the Via Agliè food aid hub as part of the current scholarly debate around the role of food banks in Europe. On one hand, food banks have been criticised in terms of their organisation, efficiency and implications (for example, in terms of related challenges in monitoring of food poverty) (e.g. Riches and Silvasti 2014; Kenny and Sage 2019). Authors such as Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015) also highlighted the morality which such systems reproduce, namely the "shift from entitlement to a gift relationship" (413) and the depoliticization of the notion of food poverty.

On the other hand, geographers such as Cloke *et al*. (2016) take a different position counterarguing that food banks can also be spaces where political and ethical values challenging neoliberal austerity can emerge "in the meantime(s)". These authors discuss food banks as welfare "in the meantime" and, building on Gibson-Graham (2006) notion of "reading for difference", call for alternative ways of understanding food banks going beyond their representations as spaces where neoliberal reform and depoliticization of food poverty become practice. While, as an anthropologist, it would be difficult not to agree with the importance of looking for nuances and complexity, with the previous chapter I showed how food aid is embedded in long term welfare configurations. These already normalised the transformation of entitlements into needs and, as part of this processes, the "in the meantime" has, since a long time, become common sense.

Food aid packages

Experiencing welfare through food packages

In this section, I describe the food packages prepared at the community centre following a material culture approach: I use the analysis of specific (food) items as a tool for unravelling the societal relations that surround them (Woodward 2007). I show how the food donated was often market surplus, such as overripe fruits and vegetables, that was recycled into food aid. I highlight that the assessment of the quality of these products was a relative and relational one, namely not only associated to the conditions of the product itself but also evaluated considering the overall resources available as well as the socio-economic conditions of food recipients.

I also raise the question of the way in which food recipients might experience their relation to the state through these packages. As argued by Tarabusi in her discussion about the significance of an anthropology of welfare in Italy:

> social policies represent the field in which people have a concrete experience of the state, where they learn the explicit and implicit rules to which they must conform not to be excluded from society […].[127]

It is also in this "field", the author adds, that people internalize the violence that can hide behind the rhetoric of aid (Tarabusi 2022; Ong 2006) such as making direct experience of the progressive welfare state retrenchment. In the context of the Via Agliè food hub, such concrete experience became even more complex because of the fragmented presence of the state which seemed to become one with non-profit organisations and other forms of social solidarity.

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[127] Tarabusi (2022, 15, translation is my own). Original text: "Le politiche sociali rappresentano, infatti, il campo in cui le persone fanno esperienza concreta dello Stato, apprendono le regole esplicite e implicite a cui occorre conformarsi per non essere esclusi dalla società […]".

Parts of these arguments have been already discussed in literature about food banks (from various disciplines, among which sociology, political science, geography and anthropology) which developed over the last decades. The book *First World Hunger Revisited: Food Charity or the Right to Food?*, edited by Riches and Silvasti (2014), is a good exemplification of the different kind of critical arguments developed around such forms of welfare. The volume reports on several case studies, discussing how the proliferation of food banks can be associated to a shift in the management of hunger from a right-based approach to one of charity. Several of the contributions specifically analyse European societies and connect the proliferation of food banks to the crisis, raising inequalities and austerity (Riches and Silvasti 2014).

In particular, Lambie-Mumford and Dowler (2014) report on contemporary British context where food poverty has re-emerged as a social problem, while public expenditure and welfare state support are being reduced. The institutional response is therefore replaced with an increasing number of non-governmental organisations that attempt to ensure people's primary needs. Lambie-Mumford and Dowler (2014)'s analysis is relevant here firstly because of the similarities with the Italian case in terms of the growing role of the third sector in the management of food poverty (Maino et al. 2016). Secondly, among the various critiques to this aid system, Dowler (2015) highlights the fact that food packages might not always be adequate because of the poor quantity or quality of the food provided. In this section, I analyse the materiality of food packages composed at Via Agliè during the emergency to contribute to this critique by revealing how they might reproduce existing inequalities in terms of access to appropriate food.

Food packages as the circulation of products and symbols

The preparation of food aid packages included several steps. First, the organisation of the pallets (containing large quantity of food) and their appropriate sharing out in the limited space of the courtyard of the Via Agliè community centre. Everything had to be sorted out to make all products accessible to the hands of the volunteers. The second step consisted of the composition of the packages and their distribution among the volunteers in charge of the delivery. At the

same time, other volunteers would be taking care of the paperwork, namely checking the lists of recipients and dividing them according to their address. This was meant to facilitate the distribution of the packages. This group of volunteers would create paper labels (indicating the household's name, number of members and occasionally other details), which we would fix with tape on the boxes. The other details on the label normally included whether the household needed children's diapers (and related size), stationary material, and if these recipients ate meat. No halal products were available therefore Muslim families (corresponding to a considerable share of the recipients) were automatically categorised as "no meat". Finally, one or two other volunteers would call the recipients to alert them about the prompt arrival of their packages. This was done to ensure that someone would be at home at the time of the delivery.

The work normally flowed in quite an organised manner. Some days turned out to be more stressful than others. In particular, when packages labels got lost, the dispatch of food pallets was delayed, some households did not answer to the phone or, only rarely, if volunteers were too few. The quantities of products available varied over time and period of abundance contrasted with periods during which the hub lacked the products to compose appropriate packages.

[Images 34. A food package for a household of six people in the making. 14/05/2020. Photo by the author.]

The packages were composed of all sorts of products that were brought at the community centre. These included food products collected by the food bank *Banco Alimentare* (in particular fruits and vegetables), donations of private enterprises (often non-food items such as face masks and baby care products) and EU FEAD products (usually dry products, including pasta, sugar, milk and canned meat). EU FEAD stands for Fund for European Aid to the Most Deprived and it is a European Union program implemented since 1987 to "support EU countries' action to provide food and/or basic material assistance to the most deprived" (European Commission – Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion 2021). While the program is designed at European level, national authorities "take individual decisions leading to the delivery of the assistance through partner organisations (often non-governmental)" (European Commission – Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion 2021).

As analysed by Dorondel and Popa (2014), based on their research of EU FEAD products distribution in Romania, such approach to the implementation of the program "give[s] a 'local flavour' to a centralized policy" (126). As argued by these authors, this approach invites for a more complex analysis of how the state works. At the community centre, on one hand, the presence of EU FEAD products materialised the presence of the public administration and European institutions. They contributed to legitimise the centre as an official hub sponsored by the municipality and differentiated it from grassroots networks. Their presence in the package also partly shaped the ways in which the package was perceived by its recipients, who received no information about the agents behind it. Were the packages sent by the municipality, by charitable organisations or by volunteers? Such confusion was generated by the many apparently contradictory features of this system. For example, recipients had registered themselves through an official helpline - or were registered directly by social services or charitable organisations that they were in contact with. Later they communicated only with volunteers, whom often had to highlight their limited power by arguing they were "only volunteers". This happened to me as well, when it was impossible for me to answer to their questions. Finally, to add to this confusion, recipients then received products marked with institutional logos such as the EU FEAD products.

Dorondel and Popa (2014) also invite to think of the circulation of such products as embedded in local dynamics and power relations. Power relations in the distribution of food aid clearly emerged in the everyday work at the community centre. As a matter of fact, all products were handled by the volunteers and employees, who decided to whom and in which quantity they were to be allocated. Their allocation depended on the overall variety and quantity of food available, which changed daily thus required continuous adjustments.

Food surplus as food aid

Among the food donations piled in the courtyard, there were also many end-of-stock items about to expire. For example, towards the end of April, this was the case of substantial quantities of seasonal sweet products. These included the typical sweet bread and chocolate eggs, which are normally sold and consumed only during Easter festivities and after which they are not suitable for the market anymore. As often observed in the literature on food aid, the waste generated all along the food chain is often transformed into resources redistributed to the most vulnerable groups of the population (e.g. Toldo 2017). In Turin, similarly to many other cities, food surplus recollection and redistribution characterise many contemporary food aid initiatives - as also discussed in relation to the case of Eco dalle Città and Fa Bene, presented in previous section of this dissertation. As explained by Gracjasz and Grasseni (2020, 44) in relation to Polish Food Bank – which operated similarly to the Via Agliè food hub:

> Not only does the *Food Bank* take on the government's responsibility of feeding the poor, the *Food Bank* rescues food "waste" and creates institutionalised systems for its distribution.

While the Via Agliè hub did not rescue food waste directly, it was the space where such surplus was reassessed and, if possible, given back a productive function by reintroducing it into consumption circuits.

Riches and Silvasti (2014) and Dowler and Lambie-Mumford (2015), among others, developed in depth critiques of the redistribution of food surplus as food aid. These authors examine the ways in which

such mechanism perfectly fit within capitalist logic of food overproduction and unequal distribution of resources. Paradoxically, distributing food surplus as aid often contributes to legitimate capitalism as an efficient and moral system and is presented as a solution to both issues of food waste and food insecurity. Authors such as Kenny and Sage (2019) demonstrated how such mechanism can even represent an obstacle to reintroducing food as a common good and working towards healthy and inclusive food systems. In particular, these authors highlight the issues of malnutrition and unhealthy diets among vulnerable groups of the population as well as the lack of possibility to choose for aid recipients (Kenny and Sage 2019).

At the Via Agliè hub such use of food surplus had immediate consequences in terms of the quality of the food package being composed. This was particularly the case with regards to fruits and vegetables, which arrived sporadically but always in vast quantities. These were often very ripe and, in some cases, looked almost perished. Because of this, during the composition of food packages, some of us volunteers were responsible of selecting and washing these products. I experienced such task as quite a repetitive but important one. Next, I discuss through few examples how such process of selection was shaped by volunteers' discretion and how it also connected to an attempt to evaluate, from a distance, the conditions of food recipients.

A first example in this sense was the selection of green leafy vegetables. Iceberg salads arrived closed in plastic bags and the first leaves were in most cases damaged or rotten. One day, a volunteer who had taken the lead in cleaning these salads explained to me how she proceeded and, more precisely, how she drew the line between what to keep and what not. In her case, she had quite a strict approach to what she considered good-enough and removed anything that looked too bad. On another occasion, I was selecting and cleaning prunes with two other young volunteers. In that situation, we all felt that the prunes which we were selecting and washing were not very good. However, since only very few fruits had arrived at the community centre over the last days, we felt like our selection could not be too strict and had to include them in the packages.

[Images 35. Selecting and cleaning prunes. 14/05/2020. Photo by the author.]

Overall, these decisions did depend on and vary according to the judgement of volunteers. They seemed to share different feelings about this process. While we composed the packages, some argued that, in the context of the emergency, it was better to receive something rather than nothing. Fewer were more careful, calling into question the issue of dignifying and undignifying food. However, these matters never became the subject of a group discussion. As argued by one of the volunteers (who preferred to remain anonymous) during an interview:

> We cannot do this: we are giving food waste to people that already have many problems. You treat them like if they were less important. So, indeed, there was a [food] distribution but was it equitable? I don't think so.[128]

These issues were also discussed as part of the Rete Zona Aurora Solidale, which, to much more limited extent, also used food surplus recollected directly at open-air food markets. Members of the network also found themselves learning how to select what was good-enough, operating, however, what looked like a stringent selection in the name of the "dignity" of people that needed to be preserved[129].

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[128] Volunteer at Via Agliè, interview, 21/05/2020.

[129] Rete Zona Aurora Solidale activist, video recording, 02/05/2020.

Heterogeneous food standards or the stratification of citizenship

These few examples are important to reflect on the social construction of food standards and to understand how they might reflect different conceptualisations of citizenship and citizens' rights. Food standards and its symbolic value represent long-term research topics in anthropology. Mintz and Dubois (2002) retraced how the functions of food have been studied from different perspectives, such as historical materialism, structuralism and symbolism. Moreover, recurrent themes emerged in food-related ethnographies from the 1980s onwards, including food and social change, food and identity, and food rituals. In the context of the hub, a material culture approach to food helps unravelling the moral concerns that surround the selection and classification of food deemed appropriate. The definition of what was good-enough differed from one volunteer to the other and was not always corresponding to an item's intrinsic value. It depended on general food availability and, most importantly, on the position of who was going to eat it.

The idea that the recipient was a person in vulnerable socio-economic conditions altered the food selection criteria, and many products were considered good-enough not in absolute term but because these were intended for people having no other choice. In this perspective, the quality of the food distributed reproduced a categorisation of citizens' rights following existing social inequalities.

[Images 36. A volunteer selecting and cleaning peaches. 14/05/2020. Photo by the author.]

Such stratification of citizens was further visible following the pathway of some products (such as overripe fruits) that were discarded from the composition of the food packages. To avoid to throw them away, some were redistributed among the centre's employees and volunteers who wanted to process them – for example by making jams with the cut peaches visible in the picture above. What was left was put at the exit of the community centre or on the street as a way of giving it away for free. Some were thrown away in the garbage in the street, where some people still stopped by to take them out of the bins. A few times, I also asked if I could take it and distribute it in other networks. One day, for example, a friend and I brought overripe bananas to occupants of social housing, as illegal occupants were cut out of the list of institutional food aid. Another time, we brought some perished crackers to a group of homeless, who were camping in the street as the public dorms had been closed because of the spreading of the virus (see also Redazione Quotidiano Piemontese 2020). I mention these examples to show how the life cycle of such food surplus often continued. In other words, the boundaries between food and waste retraced more or less tacit boundaries between categories of citizens: citizens that were officially entitled to food surplus, citizens who could take what was left over and so on, with the leftover of the leftover.

Overall, the quantity and quality of the food managed at the hub varied and, in my opinion, was not always good, especially in the case of fresh products such as fruits and vegetables. As mentioned earlier, while these issues raised some questions among the volunteers and workers of the centre, these had no say on what was delivered. This was different in the case of the members of the Rete Zona Aurora Solidale, whom discussed all together in weekly assemblies where and what to procure as donations and leftovers.

Volunteers at the Via Agliè hub learned to clean and select food deemed appropriate-enough for food recipients in vulnerable socio-economic conditions, while dealing with time pressure and the necessity to produce a large number of packages. Such food selection criteria clearly reproduced existing inequalities in terms of access to nutritious and healthy food. In this perspective, I argue that a material culture analysis of food aid packages reveals a differentiated approach to food quality and an underlying stratification of citizens. I argue that this impacted not only the diet of the recipients, but also their relation with and experience of the public administration. As a matter of fact, it is also through these food packages that citizens experienced welfare state retrenchment and the normalisation of the recasting of their right to food into aid. An aid that was most often composed with what is possible to retrieve from the excess of the system. This included moments of food shortage during which the deliveries were delayed and, in some cases, more than 12 days passed with some households not receiving anything. While the idea that the municipality was not taking any action was strongly criticized in other networks, it was not openly discussed by the volunteers of this hub. In the next section, I unpack why, exploring more in detail the positioning and perceptions of local volunteers.

From volunteers to local heroes

Volunteerism and the redefinition of the public sphere

As discussed above, the organisation of the (so-called institutional) food aid hub highly relied on the work of volunteers. This is a widespread phenomenon and is often discussed as a characteristic of contemporary configurations of welfare in Italy - as demonstrated by the literature and the recurrence of this theme in the dissertation. In this section, I report more in details about the perspective of the volunteers at the Via Agliè food hub. I examine their motivations, ideas about the initiative and (self-)representations. After looking at the hub from a material culture perspective, I discuss the morality that surrounded the hub and the way in which it was represented. Examining the morality around volunteer work allows to address questions such as: who were the citizens that got involved at the hub in such period of emergency? What were their motivations? How were these parts of and functional to the moral construction and practical development of contemporary welfare configurations, such as the notion of community care?

My reflections are particularly informed by the analyses of volunteerism developed by Rozakou (2016) and Pusceddu (2020). These authors point to changing models of volunteerism and to the ways in which volunteers make sense of their role in a context of contamination between what is institutional and charitable food aid. The work of Rozakou (2016) is focused on the Greek society and on the changing nature of local solidarity initiatives after the crisis. Before the crisis, volunteerism was promoted from the top down and such "institutionalized volunteerism" remained unpopular. Instead, contemporary Greece is characterised by the raise of solidarity activities promoted by people who conceive their activities very differently, going beyond the figure of the professional volunteer and that like to define themselves differently (e.g. solidarian). While at the Via Agliè hub, volunteers called themselves as such, the work of Rozakou (2016) will be used to show the different ways in which they understood and questioned their role and status.

Pusceddu (2020)'s work focuses precisely on the self-perception of volunteers in Italy, which he explores from a moral economy perspective. The author focuses on the context of the Italian Caritas food bank in the period in which it underwent an increasing bureaucratisation. In particular, a growing number of welfare tasks were transferred from the state to the organisation. For example, new parameters of eligibility and selection criteria were put in place and managed directly by volunteers. As part of these processes, Pusceddu (2020, 2) argued:

> The ways volunteers deal with the transfer of responsibility and care from the centralized welfare state to charity in the wake of the austerity crisis, and how they perceive their "voluntary work" in filling the gap of an increasingly fragmented and decentralized welfare state.

The questions I deal with in this section are similar to the ones of Pusceddu (2020), namely interrogating the perspective of volunteers to reveal their visions of their role, and more generally, of the needs of the area and the changing functions of the public administration. At the Via Agliè food hub, the emergency context and high number of food packages to be prepared did not particularly facilitate the emergence of moments of reflexivity and discussion. Many issues emerged in the making and people made sense of what was being done while doing.

The group of volunteers was quite varied. It included middle class city inhabitants acquainted with occasional voluntary work, local youth differently involved in local urban renewal projects and unemployed in their forties, who had lost their jobs because of the pandemic. I will particularly focus on these two last categories (local youth and the unemployed) as I believe that their outlooks on volunteerism can offer new perspective for its analysis and critique. Moreover, their social and economic conditions can help problematizing the boundary between who gives and who needs aid. As a matter of fact, in a context like the working-class neighbourhood and the pandemic crisis, this distinction was particularly fragile. Even when the socio-economic situation of the people who gave and received food was not substantial, the food aid hub reproduced such divisions. In other words, it hindered the possibility to go beyond the differentiation

between the volunteer and the aid recipient, because of how this system was organized.

As highlighted by Muehlebach (2012) it is precisely such distinction that is reproduced through the "humanitarianization of the public sphere" (46) and the moral reconfiguration of social relations and connections. Building on Arendt (1958), the author argues that the notion of the public is reconfigured as acts of compassion between unequal parties (Muehlebach 2012, 46). At the hub, the idea of inequality reproduced as part of a clear division of roles and societal stands between volunteers and aid recipients – rather than in terms of actual material conditions. The moral language employed at the centre made it difficult for volunteers to connect to these recipients and realize the ways in which their rights were being equally affected by larger transformations. In the next sections, I discuss the motivations and perceptions of different volunteers. As also demonstrated in relation to the various profiles of volunteers at Orti Generali and Eco dalle Città, volunteerism should be regarded as a plural phenomenon that necessitates to be unpacked.

"I feel more like a citizen"

Among the local youth active at the food aid hub, I met Soukaina, a girl in her early 20s. She grew up in the area where she continued living with her family of Moroccan origins, while studying nursing. Soukaina was already active in a local project targeted to Italian and first or second-generation immigrants called *YEPP (Youth Empowerment Partnership Programme) Porta Palazzo*. *YEPP* aimed at involving youth from 16 to 27 years old with the idea of giving them the tools to directly create the activities they need in their area[130]. Since she started participating in YEPP, Soukaina took up an increasing number of responsibilities in the organisation of activities such as group excursions but also the management of bureaucracy. Following the vision of the project, the latter should have ultimately been fully managed by the youth itself, without the support of social

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[130] Soukaina Bouallala, volunteer at the Via Agliè community center, interview, 04/06/2020. See also YEPP (n.d.).

workers. While being involved in YEPP, Soukaina had started to feel "more like a citizen":

> Now I feel more like a citizen. More like a citizen of my city. Because I am doing something for my city, I am working and meeting youngsters so I create social fabric and so it really makes me feel more active. I am not only the little girl who was going around but I am really working in it, trying to improve the neighbourhood and to meet the needs that we, especially as youngsters, have. [131]

Soukaina's idea of citizenship is deeply interrelated with the idea of taking care of her neighbourhood, "doing something" and being "active". Her language, such as the use of the term "social fabric", reflects the moral sentiments that are passed on within non-profit organisations - also previously discussed as processes of "engineering community spirit" (de Wilde and Duyvendak, 2016) - and which she probably learned as part of her experience in YEPP. As Soukaina explained, she experienced the project both as a voluntary worker and beneficiary. It is such combination of roles that allowed her to feel empowered and more like a citizen.

It is within the YEPP network that Soukaina learned about the Via Agliè community centre's call for volunteers at the times of the COVID-19 outbreak. Shortly after she joined the group of volunteers, she became one of its central figures: she joined almost every day (regardless of whether she had been allocated to a shift or not), taking an active role and sympathizing with everybody. As she mentioned, she immediately felt "at home": she made jokes and liked to put music on while we were working. She found the situation stressful, but she attempted to find ways to cope with the tension of not having enough

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[131] Soukaina Bouallala, interview, 04/06/2020. Original quote: "*Ora mi sento più cittadina. Più cittadina della mia città, ecco. Perché sto facendo qualcosa per la mia città, ci sto lavorando e conosco dei giovani quindi creo anche del tessuto sociale e quindi si mi fa sentire proprio più attiva. Non solo la ragazzetta che girava ma proprio ci lavoro, cercando di migliorare il quartiere e di venire incontro alle necessità che noi giovani abbiamo soprattutto.*"

food available. Soukaina also spoke Moroccan Arabic and she soon became a key resource and reference point in the mediation with households where nobody spoke Italian.

The case of Soukaina is exemplificatory of the path of many young volunteers, who grow up and are trained within the culture of active citizenship and volunteerism. As youth growing up in vulnerable areas of the city, their personal trajectories were shaped by their encounters with non-profit organisations, which provided social services in such contexts (e.g. afterschool activities, youth social inclusion programs). For many of these youngsters, welfare always was framed as such, namely as something to be constructed through the engagement of targeted groups themselves. In this approach, it is the moving boundaries between beneficiary and volunteer which transforms people's social role, upgrading their status to the one of citizen.

Such moving boundaries between the condition of aid recipient to the one of active citizen and back was also visible in the case of other people encountered in the field. For example, this was the situation of Nadia, the local leader of *Fa Bene* food distribution project, whom I have introduced before. With the COVID-19 crisis, her role within local food aid networks had shifted to the one of aid recipient, as she was now at home and benefitted from the food aid package herself. She was afraid to leave her house due to the sanitary situation and, as a single parent, had to take care of her daughter as school was suspended. The COVID-19 crisis had also transformed the everyday life and socio-economic conditions of several Italian men in their forties such as Antonio, Giorgio, Marco and Giacomo (a pseudonym), whom I met at the community centre and will introduce next. Their precarious work situations had worsened with the crisis and had left them without an occupation or reduced their working hours and collaborations. It was because of their time availability, and thanks to their direct or indirect connections to the community centre, that they engaged as volunteers as part of the food aid hub.

Critical viewpoints

I met Marco and Giacomo while volunteering at the hub. They were both living in the area since a few years and were acquainted with the community centre. They visited it as a space for gathering with friends, to eat at the café or to attend cultural events. Both were familiar with Turin network of community centres. During the interviews, they talked about the centres' sociality, describing it as diverse but also characterised by left wing, white, educated people, working precariously in the social, educational or artistic field.

Before moving to Barriera di Milano, Marco lived in another neighbourhood, San Salvario, where he regularly visited the local community centre. Giacomo was also part of a similar urban scene: he had participated for many years in another network of social and cultural centres named ARCI clubs (*circoli ARCI*). The Italian Association for Recreation and Culture (*ARCI – Associazione Ricreativa e Culturale Italiana*) was founded in Florence in 1956 to link the activities of local recreational centres managed and attended by people close to the Italian communist and socialist parties. Over the decades, local centres affiliated to ARCI developed all over Italy and, as per 2022, these are around 4400. The ARCI clubs promote social and cultural activities in relation to the themes of social inclusion and migration, social and civic rights, anti-mafia and anti-fascism. These are also denoted as spaces for local initiatives, social gathering, food and beverage.

With the outbreak of COVID-19, both Giacomo and Marco felt that it was important for them to do something to support their neighbourhood. When reading about the call for volunteers on the Facebook page of the community centre, Marco had immediately decided to participate to the food aid hub. Like many other local inhabitants, he was also hit by the crisis and had lost his employment as a technician for public events, concerts and shows: "since the lockdown started, we do not have any stages to be assembled, so I am basically unemployed"[132]. Similarly, Giacomo had recently lost his

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[132] Marco Pianelli, volunteer, video interview, 11/05/2020.

employment. At the beginning of the lockdown, he had seen people moving things around the community centre:

> I saw Erika and said "are you moving things out? Do you need a hand?" and Erika [replied] "yes, come here". And that's it [laughing], that is how I got caught up in this thing![133]

From there, Giacomo started to volunteer at the hub almost every day. Then, in May, he found a part-time job and had to reduce his participation. However, this did not particularly worry him or the others, as, in the meantime, many other volunteers had joined the hub.

When volunteering at Via Agliè, both Marco and Giacomo often took care of organisational tasks such as rearranging the courtyard to make it more functional, moving food pallets with the trolley and carrying the heaviest food packages. Both felt that their contribution was linked to their past professional experience and related skills: they were used to collective manual work and knew the organisation needed to make it efficient. It is also based on their experience that they developed an analytical outlook on the functioning of the hub. In particular, Giacomo mentioned that he found it to be quite chaotic. The type of work being done was enormous and of foremost importance, while the people working at it were not specialised in this field. Volunteers and employees were experimenting, unsure about how to proceed, constructing a way to move forward, with no specific competences. While he recognised that the organisation of the hub got better with time and that people were animated with good intentions, he asked:

> I don't know who here had ever managed team work before. I worked with big services where there were two, three, four people who did not know anything about what was the issue at stake, but directed 50 of us. Because when you move things, transport, assemble, there is a need for proper organisation. Here we dispatch things for 650 families a week I think: these are huge numbers! […].[134]

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[133] Giacomo – a pseudonym, volunteer, interview, 21/05/2020.

[134] Giacomo – a pseudonym, interview, 21/05/2020.

Giacomo problematised the quality of volunteer work and the lack of professionals in the organisation of important social services. Both Giacomo and Marco underlined that the role of institutions should have been different. In particular, Giacomo problematised the way in which volunteering was often performed in an acritical manner. He did not share this approach. He pointed out how, in the past, he would have never imagined participating in such initiative. While he partook to it in the context of the pandemic, he maintained a critical viewpoint. He found particularly problematic that many other volunteers simply found it a very beautiful initiative, without interrogating its reasons and consequences. Among these, he denounced the absence of a public response to the emergency:

> We are fully substituting ourselves to what should be the social assistance performed by the city, the region, the province, the state, which, except for the showgirl-like apparition of our mayor, to say how cool we are now that we are doing this thing, did not put a penny, did not hire a worker, a truck, nothing. Once they delivered European food aid. Only once. For the rest it was all *Banco Alimentare* and all groups financed by *Compagnia di San Paolo*.[135]

While I will go back to the changing role of the municipality and its different phases of (non) intervention, the comment of Giacomo is important here to highlight that such argumentation, while rare, also appeared at the hub. His views were much more similar to the one of the activists of Rete Zona Aurora Solidale than to the one of other volunteers and employees at Via Agliè.

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[135] Giacomo – a pseudonym, interview, 21/05/2020. Original quote: "*Perché ci stiamo sostituendo in tutto e per tutto a delle dinamiche che dovrebbero essere di assistenza sociale della città, della regione, della provincia e dello stato e invece, eccetto un'apparizione della nostra sindaca per fare la velina di quanto siamo fighi che stiamo facendo questa roba qua, quando non ha messo un soldo, non ha messo un operatore, un furgone, niente. […] C'è stata una consegna sola che mi ricordo che era di materiale di aiuti alimentari europei. Solo una volta. Per il resto Banco Alimentare e tutte realtà finanziate da Compagnia di San Paolo.*"

Marco also commented critically on the absence of public support during the pandemic. He connected it to the long-term situation of the neighbourhood and its ongoing transformations. He mentioned the lack of public spaces for social gathering, interaction and services. He juxtaposed it to the excess of shopping malls and the issue of the so-called cementification (a literal translation of *cementificazione* – see also Guano (2020)), alluding to the new building being constructed in the area despite all its abandoned ones (inherited from the period of the industrial boom). The only social gathering opportunities in Barriera di Milano relied on the efforts of the Third Sector. In his view, the management and the organisation of the hub were simply a coherent continuum with the rest – as I have also demonstrated in the previous chapter.

By presenting the views of Marco and Giacomo, I want to nuance the idea of "uncritical solidarity" as discussed by de Armiño (2014), which represents one among many articles that depict volunteers as people who do not question the political implications of their activities. While de Armiño (2014) examined the environment of food banks in Spain, a similar attitude is also observed by Lorenz (2012), who discussed the case of the German charitable food assistance *Tafel* and its volunteers. Based on the case of the volunteers at the Via Agliè food aid hub, I tend to agree with these authors, but I argue that more critical outlooks might also circulate in these environments. This was also pointed out by Pusceddu (2020) in the case of volunteers active in impoverished neighbourhoods in Southern Italy. These were sceptical about their involvement in the bureaucratic procedures increasingly left in their hands. Similarly, at Via Agliè, some people did ask themselves critical questions. However, these often remained silenced and emerged only during one-to-one conversations (and were rather avoided during grouped discussions). In other words, the lack of political discussion and democratic debate around what was being done did not derive from the lack of critical thinking but rather from the fact that talking about these matters openly would contrast with the hub's atmosphere.

As Giacomo once said to me, when someone exposed more critical viewpoints, he or she was immediately labelled as the boring and negative person, which made it a hard position to be in, one that would. This position would at least temporarily, differentiate the

person from the rest of the group. I also experienced this directly, when sharing more critical reflections about the functioning of the hub. Building on these experiences, I argue that the "postwelfarist morality" (Muehlebach 2012) should not only be examined in the narratives, representations and viewpoints that circulate in these environments but also by keeping an eye on what is silenced or left unspoken. The issue of these silenced analyses is like the one of the silenced confrontations, which occurred in the context of the urban gardening project Orti Generali, as described in the first chapters of the dissertation. Building on the words of Giacomo, it is the difference between "solidarity" and "equity" that is particularly hard to be outspoken and which is rarely discussed during collective moments. In part, it is because these groups are highly morally connotated. They represent an example of highest sentiments, an active and united community, and the only alternative to abandonment. These ideas do not leave much space for reflecting about how these activities can be counterproductive to the achievement of societal equity (e.g. Lorenz 2012). In the next section, I turn specifically to such construction of the group of volunteers as a morally-connotated and united community.

The construction and representation of the Via Agliè community

Between April and May 2020, the group of volunteers grew significantly: in total we were around 50[136], divided in two shifts a day (morning and afternoon), from Tuesday to Friday. Most volunteers were part of the "storage brigade" (*brigata magazzino*) and were concerned with the composition of food aid packages. The others were part of the "phone calls brigade" (*brigata telefonate*): they answered to the calls of food recipients, assessed their needs, as introduced before. The "delivery brigade" (*brigata consegne*) was composed by the volunteers who had a car and were available to deliver the packages to four to five households.

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[136] I take as a reference point the shifts sheet for May 5-8 shared on 01/05/2020 by one of Via Agliè employees on the volunteers WhatsApp group chat.

The volunteers were coordinated by the two community centre employees: Hakima and Martina, who did the same tasks as the volunteers, worked closely with them with friendliness, care and availability. They also had the responsibility of being constant reference points, coordinating the group and taking care of the communication with externals such as the deliverers of the food stocks. Despite the stress, they managed to entertain good relations with the volunteers, as also noted by Heederik (2020), who discussed the silenced tensions between paid advisers and volunteers in the context of an advice centre in Manchester. As Heederik (2020, 6) elaborated:

> Despite having tensions in the workplace, where advisers sometimes feel volunteers just add to their workload and volunteers feel left to their own devices, these tensions did not seem to translate into frustration with one another.

Erika, the head of the community centre, did not work with the volunteers but passed by the centre several times a week. She monitored and took care of the overall coordination of the activities, emergencies and the relations with institutions and other food hubs. She always looked very busy, often said that she was in a rush, but her approach was one of extreme friendliness with everyone. She often knew the volunteers from past experiences, she dialogued and joked with them and learned immediately the name of new members.

It is important to note that the composition and numbers of volunteers changed over time. For example, from June 2020 onwards, the number of volunteers decreased as, with the end of the most restrictive phase of the lockdown, some started to work again and others left town for the summer break. Moreover, the partial redefinition of the lockdown allowed people to circulate and food recipients were invited to collect their food packages autonomously – consequently the "delivery brigade" was significantly downsized. Only some volunteers were there from the start to the end of my participant observation at the hub (in July 2020). These persons (including Soukaina and Marco, together with the community centre employees Martina and Hakima) represented influential figures, who gave a continuity to the group and

passed on the friendly way of interacting with and advising one another.

The courtyard was often animated with music – including life music, with the project *Canta Oltre* organised by members of Rescue!, who played and sang for the volunteers active during the pandemic across the city (Progetto Rescue 2023) -, lively conversations and collective breaks with shared snacks such as Moroccan mint tea and overripe fruits taken from the stock. We all worked with face masks and gloves and only in certain brief moments we could discover the entire face of the others. Creating a friendly atmosphere was important to mitigate the stressful situation generated by the pandemic as well as the fast working pace at the hub. Food packages had to be assembled as quickly as possible to meet all the demands managed every day. The packages had to include the right ingredients – though often time some were missing - and following as much as possible the specific needs of beneficiaries. As commented by Soukaina:

> I started to play a game: I read the name [of food recipients] and based on that I imagine how that person could be. Even if it is quite stupid, it helps to deal with the stress. At night when I go to bed, I dream of all the people for whom I prepared the package. I do a brainstorming thinking if I put the diapers, this and that.[137]

Like others, Soukaina attempted to mitigate the stress through her active participation in the construction of a sense of community among the volunteers. In this perspective, it is interesting to note how the ideas of solidarity, collaboration and community care were also attributed to the relations among the volunteers, regarded as a category, with specific needs to be accounted for. Ways of working together such as the ones mentioned above, allowed to develop a form of the community care by and for the volunteers as well as an imaginary of collectivity.

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[137] Soukaina, interview, 04/06/2020.

[Images 37. Volunteers working together to stock the food products.
28/05/2020. Screenshot from video by the author.]

The community of volunteers was also at the centre of the many
representations of the hub. These representations were multiple,
including self-representations, media accounts and artistic-like
narrations. These shared similar features in the way in which they
described the organisation of this food aid hub. Paradoxically, they
managed to emphasise both the community-like dimension of the hub,
while highlighting individual contributions. I noted such feature also
thanks to the juxtaposition of this case with the one of the Zona Aurora
Solidale network, where, on the contrary, individual efforts rarely
emerged in the accounts and representations of the initiative. When
talking about their activities, these activists preferred to use the
pronoun "we" and when the name of one of their members appeared
on the local newspaper (Roselli 2020) they problematized it, deciding
to remain anonymous during future interactions with journalists.

An example in relation to the case of the Via Agliè food aid hub is the
Corriere Della Sera newspaper article written in April 2020 entitled
"the other emergency and the hidden heroes" (Coccorese 2020), which
referred specifically to the food emergency and the volunteers of the
Via Agliè hub. After briefly reporting on the atmosphere at the
community centre, the journalist describes the profile of the volunteers

who engaged at the hub, also reporting their views and the organisation of the hub by quoting them directly. The reference to heroism is interesting here and is to be connected to media accounts about the burgeoning civic values (such as sense of sacrifice and diffuse solidarity) which accompanied the pandemic more generally. This language reverberated the war language that spread in political speeches and the medias. As analysed by Cassandro (2020), the corona virus was commented with several metaphors that referred to the war, such as the recurring expression "we are at war" (*siamo in guerra)*. The author refers to the analysis of Sontag (1978) who theorised such link between the ways in which diseases are discussed and the language of war and emergency. References to the war allow for approaching complex social problems as a state of exception in which all forms of sacrifices seem to be legitimate (Sontag 1978).

In the context of my fieldwork, presenting volunteers as heroes was an integral component of the celebration of voluntarism and the normalisation of welfare state retrenchment. As also discussed by Hemment (2012) in the case of postsocialist Russia, such language is among the elements that facilitate the reception of neoliberal technologies, which "can actually stimulate socialist imaginaries" (522). As reminded by the author: "neoliberal practices (such as self-help and self-work) persuade and convince precisely because they resonate with or resemble prior socialist forms" (Hemment 2012, 522). In this perspective, in the Italian context, such celebration of voluntarism – and its history – winks to the catholic tradition of charity and participation, new and old ideas of community care of the Left as well philanthropists who also support neoliberal welfare reform (e.g. Muehlebach 2012; Marcon 2004). It is important to note, as also visible in Pionati (1990)'s "guide to Italian voluntarism", that the celebration of voluntarism in various historical phases meant underlying its different definitions and connotations, thus also making it always more like a container, which could be filled with very different practices and ideologies, mixed together and possibly manipulated (47).

The article "the other emergency and the hidden heroes" was also accompanied by a series of pictures of single volunteers in action. In a similar way, Tomás, a Brazilian reporter and photographer, developed

a photo account of solidarity and voluntarism in Turin during the pandemic. He had moved to Italy shortly before the pandemic and started to take pictures around the city to get to know the city while registering what was going on. Initially he worked for a Brazilian press agency, as Brazilian newspapers discussed the situation in Italy "so that the population there realized what was going on before it hit the country[138]. In a second moment, he developed a photography project together with the non-profit organisation Vol.TO standing for Volunteering Turin – though in Italian, *volto* also means face - which functions as the Volunteer Service Centre of the city of Turin (Volontariato Torino 2021). He gathered images of volunteers all around the city, in places such as the Via Agliè food aid hub, and later developed an exhibition called "from emptiness to faces" (*dal Vuoto al Volto*) with the support of local institutions.

To represent voluntary mobilisation during the pandemic, Tomás decided to shoot close ups of volunteers' faces. He usually took two pictures per volunteer, one with the mask and another without. As he explained:

> It is by putting together all these faces that one can realise the enormous number of people that got engaged. Some were volunteering for the first time. Some told me that in the first phase of the lockdown they were volunteering just to get out of their house. […] Some were minors. […] Some were immigrants working to help immigrants, some were Italians working to help immigrants.[139]

Tomás was surprised by the diversity of situations which he encountered in the hubs around the city, which also reflected the spatialisation of its various socio-economic contexts. He highlighted the diversity of volunteers, while presenting a more general trend that

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[138] Tomás Cajueiro, journalist and photographer, video interview, 10/08/2020.

[139] Tomás Cajueiro, video interview, 10/08/2020.

spoke of the ways in which individuals got together to work for a common "solidarity network"[140].

I argue that these attentional narrations and celebrations of volunteers, talking about a community but focusing on single individuals, moved the debate away from an analysis of the welfare reform that it (re)produced. Moreover, this attention to volunteers contrasted with the ways in which food recipients were regarded and approached as a vulnerable category.

[Images 38. Tomás in front of his exhibition. 10/08/2020. Screenshot from video by the author.]

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[140] Tomás Cajueiro, video interview, 10/08/2020.

From citizens to needy

Communicating needs

As opposed to the idea of a community of volunteers, food aid recipients were approached as a fragmented reality. At Via Agliè food hub, they were individuals or families living in Northern Turin in vulnerable socio-economic conditions. They were people with whom only few volunteers would have a direct contact. Most of the time, they were known by their name, household size, address, and sometimes their primary needs. This subsection focuses on the figure of the food aid recipient, and the way in which it is framed in this specific welfare configuration, namely as a person in need. As argued by Matos (2020), the reframing of citizens into needy and the "political mobilization of "needs" to differentiate access to resources and entitlements" (114) represent a widespread phenomenon across various countries subjected to austerity measures.

On April 3rd I was working at a table in the main room on the ground floor of the community centre, far from the other volunteers who were composing the packages in the courtyard. I was taking care of the phone calls, which meant alerting the beneficiaries of the prompt delivery of the packages and monitoring their diverse needs. I was instructed to ask them whether they were doing fine, if they necessitated something specific and fill in a questionnaire related to the educational needs of children, if there were any. I was given a phone, a pen and several folders – improvised by folding the paper placemats that were normally used at the centre's café – containing the files of the beneficiaries to be contacted. The phone kept ringing and it was hard for me to compose a new number without being interrupted.

I managed to make several phone calls between 11h and 14h, learning about the situation of very different households: Italian ones, but also many families of foreign origins, several of which Moroccans – reflecting the diverse composition of this area of the city. Each call took at least 5 minutes as most people wanted to talk and had several questions to ask. I spoke with several Italian women who felt the need to explain to me more about their situation: they told me that their income was too little, that social benefits were not sufficient to provide

for the whole family, that they requested food vouchers, but these were unavailable, that they had already mentioned these things to the social services… Why did they feel the need to justify their situation to me? On several occasions, I realized that it was not clear to them who was providing these food packages and some related it to other forms of state benefits they were entitled to or which they received in the past.

Some also felt offended by the products they had received so far: they complained about fruits and vegetables that were too ripe and had to be thrown away as well as expired yogurts. As pointed out by a young mother: "this is not what I expected! what am I supposed to do with this?". I had to answer that I was just a volunteer, that I could note down their criticism but that none of us at the hub had the possibility to change much. At that point, many of them just remained silent for a moment or thank me disappointed. We found ourselves face to face with the mechanism that prevented institution to be made accountable for what was going on and people's disappointment to be voiced.

Such contacts with the recipients allowed me to grasp few elements around the ways in which some of them presented their needs and their expectations around food aid. The use of the language of needs reverberates with the analysis of Matos (2020, 116) who writes about a progressive "retrenchment of people's sense of citizenship entitlements" and the use of the concept of need as a "vernacular morality". It is through such morality that "ordinary people seek to access material resources and to assert the legitimacy of their claims and entitlements" (Matos 2020, 125). The fact that food aid recipients presented to me their more general needs reflected new relations between the aid giver and receiver, which derived from broader transformations of the Italian welfare. People learned to navigate such fragmented system by stressing and repeating stories about their everyday life and related difficulties to attempt to convince volunteers and non-profit organisations workers about the importance of their needs.

These mechanisms reinforced what is discussed, among others, by Tosi Cambini (2022) in terms of a specific communication system (*"impianto comunicativo"*,) which is based on "a continuous request to people to demonstrate to be saying "the truth" and to "deserve"

public assistance" (199, translation is my own). While Tosi Cambini (2022) mentions this in relation to public social services, during COVID-19, these mechanisms were reinforced by the multiplication of the arenas where people were to be assisted. Having to discuss with the social services but also many other charity-like and third sector organisations, people affected by the economic crisis, austerity and lastly the COVID-19 critical period generally adapted their language and requests to the dimension of charity, providing justification for themselves through a needs-based approach.

I argue that such language, used by food aid recipients as much as providers, also speaks of a process of depoliticization of social problems and their individualisation, as if only few households, because of their supposed exceptionally difficult situation, were affected by the crisis. Among others, the anthropologist Capello (2019, 56, translation is my own) discusses neoliberal individualistic responses to the problem of unemployment, as part of his research with unemployed subjects:

> In Turin, and particularly in the old working-class suburbs, because of the crisis and the productive transition, unemployment presents itself as a widespread social problem, to which it is given, in accordance with neoliberal policies, a partial individual response, following a principle paradoxically legitimized by the very concept of social suffering.

While the reflections of Capello (2019) focus on the dimension of social suffering, which goes beyond the scope of my analysis, his work is useful here to make key connections between neoliberalism, food aid recipients' (self-)representation, the language of needs and related morality. In particular, the author argues that the moral dimension that accompanies neoliberal reform and the creation of neoliberal subjects also creates "non-subjects" (*non-soggetti*) such as in the case of the unemployed or economically marginalised subjects (Capello 2019, 35)[141]. These "non-subjects" are those who, in this system, end up lacking a status, an income and oftentimes also remain excluded from any form of structural social help.

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[141] See also Capello (2020).

Evaluating needs

At the food aid hub, the creation of "non-subjects" (Capello 2019) occurred through the moralisation of recipients' requests. This meant that they were considered as good people if satisfied. On the other hand, they could be cancelled from the list of beneficiaries, if their behaviour was considered inappropriate (e.g., disrespectful, ungrateful). This happened, for example, when some someone was not satisfied with what they had received. Some recipients said to be expecting more and fresher food. In other words, they had claims which revealed a different vision of welfare. Such vision clashed with what was feasible at the level of the Via Agliè hub and, most importantly, with their approach.

A significant episode in this sense happened when one of the community centre's workers (which I prefer not to name directly in this case) gave me the file of Giuseppe (a pseudonym), together with the ones of few other families. She was unsure whether these people had received food aid during that week. On the files, someone had written "did not respond" or "does not want the food aid package". This worker asked me to call these people and get a clearer understanding of their situation. When I looked into Giuseppe's file, I learned that he was living by himself and that he should have had received the food box on the previous day. When I called him, he confirmed that he had received a package on the previous day but explained that he had sent it back: "I got only rotten stuff". He clarified in a calm but grave tone that he had nothing to eat: "I can only eat plain pasta and I have nothing else". He argued that there was nothing to be eaten in that box: no tomato sauce, no olive oil, no beans. As he kept complaining, he asked "tell me, do you think that this is the way to take care of <u>citizens</u>?". This question embarrassed me as I realised that the package had profoundly offended him and was far from meeting his expectations.

As I pronounced his name aloud, a community centre's worker run toward me, miming and whispering to cut the phone call. Then took the file of Giuseppe out of my hands and tore it up into small pieces. Meanwhile, Giuseppe kept arguing his discontent on the phone, adding here and there expressions such as "I know you are just a volunteer,

but", thinking this would comfort me or lower the tension generated by his critical remarks. He talked compulsively for few minutes more, then listened as I attempted to provide responses that did not seem convincing to neither of us. I tried to propose to wait for the next package as maybe this would include more goods. He said no and hung up.

"I am so sorry, yesterday I forgot to take out his file from the pile!" the worker exclaimed. She told me that on the previous day Giuseppe had violently reacted to the delivery of the food package, screaming at a volunteer who "had to contact the police" and the community centre, unable to find a solution by herself. She added that it was true that the vegetables in his box were in very bad conditions, but that his reaction was so violent that it could not even be considered. The words of Giuseppe kept resonating in my head, as I finished to compose the food package I had started before the phone call. I could see that the variety of products which I was inserting in that box was indeed extremely limited: only some fruits, vegetables and biscuits. How could that be enough for a family of four for a week? But that was all that was left.

Condemning anger

The case of Giuseppe, while being an exception, firstly reveals the meaning that the category of "non-subjects" (Capello 2019, 35) took at the food aid hub, namely the very exclusion from the list of food recipients. Moreover, this case brings additional questions on the perspective of food aid recipients and their "appropriate" position in such welfare configuration. While Giuseppe's complains were recognised as legitimate, his reaction was not as it went beyond what was regarded as appropriate by the workers of the community centre. His attitude framed as "violent" and "bad" was condemned to the point that they decided to remove him from the list.

Such castigation of anger is discussed by Palazzi (2021), among others, who reflects on the way in which the anger of the oppressed is often represented as inappropriate and criminalised by authorities and the media. Building on numerous examples in Italy and beyond, Palazzi (2021) demonstrated how this is to be contextualised as part of

an increasing individualisation and psychologising of social issues which also implies that "appropriately behaving citizens" should remain silent, avoid forwarding claims or any form of social conflict, despite the various forms of oppression they might be experiencing.

Particularly interesting in this sense is Palazzi (2021)'s opening example about the protests organised by the Senegalese community in Florence in March 2018, following several racist acts of violence and murders of Senegalese and black people. After being refused to be heard by the mayor, the protesters continued their spontaneous demonstration and broke six public flower planters found on their way. These "acts of violence" were condemned by the mayor and local media, seemingly put on the same level as racist murders (Vicentini 2018). As argued by Palazzi (2021, 14, translation is my own):

> A modest externalisation of anger, when forwarded by specific subjects, produces a scandal which proportions frankly appear as incomprehensible. […] Not all forms of anger are regarded equally: the one of Salvini [far-right politician, member of the Lega party], whether we like it or not, is a form of anger that we expect, which in a way is in the nature of things. On the other hand, the anger of the Senegalese of Florence, is presented as obscene and hardly comprehensible because unexpected.

I have touched upon these themes - also representatively discussed by Bukowski (2019) in terms of "the good education of the oppressed" - in the previous chapters from other analytical angles, namely by delving into the notions of silenced confrontations (chapter two) and "deserving citizenship" (Ong 2003) (chapter five) and their meaning in the context of other collective food procurement networks in Turin. In the case of food aid distribution, such moral imperatives became particularly visible in the transformation of citizens into needy. In fact, intrinsic to this process is the delegitimisation of social anger and the mechanisms that silence important social issues by reducing them to the inappropriate discontent of a single, problematic recipient. Such analytical perspective is in line with the role played by the community centre in terms of the attenuation of social conflict in all its forms and the downplay of the expectation of local inhabitants.

Pervasiveness of the needs approach and biopower

During collective discussion within the Rete Zona Aurora Solidale, some members attributed to the community centre a partial responsibility for the maintenance of the status quo. In their analysis, while providing aid, such organisations also made people go along with the lack of appropriate food for all, without providing a space for developing a collective reflection - let alone a critique – of social services in the city. While grassroots initiatives like this network attempted to create a different model based on public discussions about these themes, this was not always easy in the face of a culture of non-profit welfarism (*assistenzialismo*) that had developed in the area over the last decades. As argued by Andrea, one of the members of Rete Zona Aurora Solidale, such pervasive assistance-like approach to poverty alleviation in the area carried important socio-cultural consequences:

> This approach is very present in Aurora and consequently it can represent an obstacle to self-organisation. I mean that people expect an intervention from someone else and it takes longer for them to really do something for themselves. And we realised this during our food distribution, right? […] Often, we were confused with people from the municipal network, I mean many people told us "Should we give you our income certificate or our name?". And we had to say no and to explain what we were doing and why and say that we needed their help. And that eventually this thing [the food distribution] needed to be organised directly by the people that we were helping.[142]

To overcome their difficulties in communicating these differences and making them an integral part of their approach, Rete Zona Aurora Solidale members often distributed leaflets about other themes that could be relevant for people in vulnerable socio-economic conditions. These included contact details of housing rights or migrant

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[142] Andrea – a pseudonym, Rete Zona Aurora Solidale activist, interview, 19/09/2020.

information grassroots collectives to invite people to talk about their situation and act. These activists also organised public distributions to:

> bring together all the people that received the food package, to do it openly […], show to local inhabitants what was being done and that it was possible to do it together. But also, to prove to institutions that this was a real problem. [143]

Going back to the contrasting approach of the Via Agliè food aid hub and the case of Giuseppe, it is important to highlight how that situation also revealed the discretion and "biopower" (Foucault 1978) that is left in the hand of non-profit organisations. I build here on the Foucauldian definition of biopower to discuss the discretionary needs approach as a control technique impacting the very subsistence of the population. Similar to the social advisors observed by Tosi Cambini (2022), also non-profit workers become, in this process, part of the system through which power is reproduced. The folder of Giuseppe was removed from the list of food recipients probably because it was too difficult to be managed by volunteers and workers of the centre. These were not social workers and already struggled to manage the many other requests forwarded by whom played along the standards and could be considered as a kind and disciplined person. Many anthropologists have talked about the categorisation of poor and discussed how there are "categories of poor who are deemed appropriate to neglect" (Gupta 2012, 63 in Dickinson 2016) or whose poverty makes them criminalised and penalised (Wacquant 2001). To further examine what the Via Agliè food aid hub can make us understand in terms of the new forms and trajectories of "biopower" (Foucault 1978), in the following section, I report more specifically on the discontinuous involvement of Turin municipal administration and consequent new tasks of non-profit organisations.

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[143] Andrea, interview, 19/09/2020.

The return of the state?

Spring 2020: the emergency phase

As mentioned before, during the first months of operations, the majority of the institutional food aid management tasks were left in the hands of community centres (and similar non-profit organisations). Beneficiaries received their food packages at home, approximately every ten days, and no detailed information was asked about the households' economic situation. The presence of the municipality was not very visible during the everyday work at the community centre. Even when the delivery of food stocks was delayed, it was never openly held responsible for such misfunctioning. All emerging issues seemed to be managed directly by the network of community centres and throughout direct communication between these and the donors. Occasionally, part of the courtyard at Via Agliè hosted small meetings between the leaders of the community centres and other food aid hubs. As explained by Erika, the communication between the various hubs was important for finding ways to proceed more efficiently. They shared contacts - of potential food donors, for example -, good management practices and, exceptionally, some food products, when these arrived in large quantities[144].

In this first phase, the municipality was present only in the background, for example in the communication made at city-level about the development of the emergency response. Such background position was clearly exemplified by the mayor's visit to the community centre on April 24, 2020. The at-the-time mayor Chiara Appendino was there together with a small filming crew to document the ongoing activities of the hub and the work of the volunteers. The video was posted on the YouTube channel and Facebook page of the mayor to showcase the work of the hubs. In the video, she presented the network of food aid hubs (*Torino Solidale*) as the way in which many volunteers and local organisations had set in motion solidarity relations. She did not refer to the contribution of the public administration in any way and the word was quickly given to the community centre director and to a volunteer. Their speeches referred

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[144] Erika Mattarella, informal conversation, 01/09/2020.

to - and, in a way, normalised – the vital role played by the volunteers and the limited intervention of the public administration.

[Images 39. The former mayor Chiara Appendino at the community centre of Via Agliè. 24/04/2020. Screenshot retrieved from the video "Solidarious Turin: here is how a food hub works": https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VWGS8eZRpY4&feature=emb_logo (accessed 11/02/2021)]

The visit was overall well received by the volunteers. Few of them, however, mentioned their discontent in the WhatsApp group, criticising the mayor for taking the merit over the work of volunteers[145]. That visit appeared as a paradox also because of the limited quantities of food available, especially as the number of food recipients had reached 735 households (2334 people) in June 2020. The situation was so critical that the community centre started a fundraising campaign addressed to the city inhabitants. It asked for cash or in-kind donations through a video[146] and flyers that were shared across all volunteers and employees' networks.

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[145] See also the interview excerpt above as part of which the volunteer Giacomo refers to the visit of the Mayor, highlighting the superficial dimension of her presence.

[146] Video available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wVZTgmYnsa8 (accessed 30/05/2022).

At that time, some people said that the food stocks received were also bought by the municipality, therefore did not consist of donations only. This information was later confirmed by the director Erika, who once mentioned that the funds of CSP and the in-kind donations had not been sufficient to respond to the many requests for food. Moreover, after a few weeks from the start of the activities, the municipality asked to the centre to hand-in their complete list of beneficiaries. It was while I was volunteering to call recipients that I was asked by one of the community centre employees to add some bureaucratic questions to my calls, such as starting to ask for their social security number. This was when I realised that eventually more selection criteria would be set and only some people would continue to be entitled to food aid.

Summer 2020: a new management

From June/July 2020 onwards, the municipality took control of the organisation of the food aid and reorganised the lists of food aid recipients by applying several selection criteria. In July, the municipality had operated changes in its budget allocation and redirected some of its funds into COVID-19-related relief activities. Moreover, national funds were transferred to the municipalities and fed into such networks (Comune di Torino 2020b)[147].The changes which occurred from July onwards transformed the set of activities conducted at the centre. Data management increasingly became a key component of the work of volunteers and employees at Via Agliè. In this second phase, the municipality was directly managing the preparation of the food packages. The support of the community centres was still key in their distribution or served as pick up locations, as most beneficiaries were asked to come to pick up their package autonomously. As municipality was taking over, it was also starting to ask and systematise information about beneficiaries' income and apply residency selection criteria.

This new phase also represented a turning point in terms of how emergency responses such as food aid were narrated in the media and institutional communication channels. In January 2021, the official

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[147] See also the previous reference to the decree *Ristori Ter.*

website of the municipality presented the food packages and food vouchers initiatives as a coupled intervention managed by the public administration. While these two interventions had been managed separately and differently, also at Via Agliè, we witnessed a progressive criss-cross between these two forms of food aid. In particular, from July 2020 onwards, the hub started to contact households who had asked for vouchers in the previous months and whose requests were left unattended. The volunteers of the hub proposed to them the possibility to receive a monthly food package instead of the vouchers (as the latter were finished).

I take this transformation as an example to analyse the complexity of the changing role of the non-profit sector. As revealed by these shifts, the intervention of these organisations was framed within the margins set by the local administration in terms of its needs and (in)ability to intervene. The fact that the non-profit sector was given or taken away specific responsibilities in these processes speaks of its moving boundary and its need to constantly adapt its features - and increasingly take over some of the bureaucratic and data management tasks. This was also pointed out by Pusceddu (2022) who pointed out to the feelings it generated among local volunteers and their perceptions about the changing relations between state and citizens. Similar aspects were also discussed in the British anthropological literature about austerity-driven welfare reforms, among others in the work of Koch (2021) which examines the figure of new "frontline workers" (245) that "come to act as a de facto welfare state as they engage in balancing acts allocating limited resources against ever growing demands for subsistence and advice" (256).

In practical terms, these shifts also involved changes in the tasks and skills performed by non-profit workers and volunteers as well as the downsizing of the service they ensured. At the community centre, the reorganisation of the initiative translated into changes in the tasks to be performed as well as in the delivery and composition of the packages. In July, the packages were assembled somewhere else and arrived at the centre already sealed with a sticker on all of them with written "Municipality of Turin". They had varied sizes according to number of people but were all bigger as the delivery was now reduced to one package per household per month. This excluded the month of August

2020 during which the community centres were closed to the public. The centres continued to oversee the distribution of the packages and management of the relation with the food recipients. Once the packages were delivered at the Via Agliè hub, the employees and volunteers stocked them in the courtyard, where beneficiaries came to pick up their package. This was also linked to the end of the lockdown most restrictive measures and the possibility for people to move again freely across the city. The households were contacted by the centre and asked to come within precise time slots to avoid mass gathering.

Once at the centre the food recipients now needed to fill in a self-declaration sheet confirming to be in state of necessity and fill some more information about their income. The self-declaration sheet (reproduced below) contained the following questions: "Are you or any of your household member receiving basic income (*Reddito di Cittadinanza*)? Enter amount; Are you or any of your household members benefitting from other support measures? Why are you in state of need? Check one of the following options: work loss or reduction; suspension of the activity; other necessities, detail."

AUTOCERTIFICAZIONE AI SENSI DELL'ART. 46 L. 445/2000

IL SOTTOSCRITTO

NATO A   IL

RESIDENTE A   Via   N

COD. FISCALE.

DICHIARA:

che un componente del nucleo è titolare di Reddito o Pensione di Cittadinanza o di altri sostegni
pubblici   □ SI   □ NO

che il componente del nucleo Sig. / Sig.ra ……………………………………………….
è titolare di Reddito o Pensione di Cittadinanza con un importo mensile pari a euro

* che il nucleo beneficia dei seguenti sostegni pubblici

   (RDC, REI, NASPI, indennità di mobilità, cassa integrazione guadagni, altro specificare)

* che il nucleo è in stato di necessità derivante da emergenza Covid-19 per la/le seguenti motivazioni
  □ perdita o riduzione del lavoro
  □ sospensione dell'attività
  □ altro ……….

CONSENSO AL TRATTA ENTO DE DAT PERSONALI

Dichiaro di essere informato, ai sensi del Regolamento UE 2016/ 679 relativo alla protezione delle persone
fisiche con riguardo al trattamento dei dati personali (GDPR) e del D.Lgs 16/2003 come modificato dal
D.Lgs. 101/2018 che i dati personali da me volontariamente forniti sono necessari per usufruire degli
interventi previsti dalla D.G.C. del 06/04/2020 (mecc. 2020 00908/019).
I dati saranno trattati esclusivamente dal personale e dai collaboratori del titolare e potranno essere
comunicati ai soggetti espressamente designati come responsabili del trattamento.

Il Titolare del trattamento è il Sindaco. Il Delegato del Titolare è il Comune di Torino - Divisione Servizi
Sociali, Socio Sanitari, Abitativi e Lavoro - Area Inclusione sociale contattabile all'indirizzo Via Bologna 49/A
Tel. 01101125873 – e-mail: ;

Il responsabile della protezione dei dati è raggiungibile all'indirizzo Email: rpd_privacy@comune.torino.it;

Sono a conoscenza di poter esercitare i diritti previsti dagli artt. 15-21 del Regolamento UE 2016/679 (es.
accesso, rettifica, cancellazione, limitazione, portabilità, opposizione), rivolgendomi alla Divisione Servizi
Sociali.
Il Comune non ricorre e processi decisionali automatici (Art. 22 del Reg UE 2016/679)

Torino, __/__/____   Letto confermato e sottoscritto

                                        _____

[Images 40. Copy of a self-declaration sheet distributed at the hub in July 2020.]

I use this document as a tool to analyse yet another way for externalising the everyday management of welfare and its bureaucracy, namely a way for passing over responsibilities directly to the citizens themselves. Through this type of bureaucratic procedure, the food recipients were asked to assess their situation directly and formally declare to be entitled to the food package. This meant that if there were some mistakes these would be the responsibility of the recipient and not of the administration. In a way, this also was revealing of the limitations of the bureaucracy monitoring system of the administration as one would expect the municipality to have an overview of this information already (namely an overview of who benefited from which services). In the next section, I delve deeper into data management as a task and responsibility passed over from the local administration to the non-profit sector and citizens.

Data management

Together with these changes, the list of beneficiaries also undergone some variations. In June, the municipality had gathered all the list of beneficiaries and operated a first selection of the ones which would continue to receive the package. The main criterion was that all food recipients should be resident in Turin. This meant that some had to be crossed off the lists. However, in several cases, these recipients continued to get some support because of the sensibility of the community centre's employees, who decided to provide them with the private donations they kept receiving. This also meant a variation in the size of some packages as the number of household members communicated by the families was not always matching the one on the municipal list of residents. Some families therefore started to receive smaller packages compared to what they had received in the first place. Finally, what was presented as the new "list of the municipality" ("*la lista del comune*") also included some new households, namely the ones who had originally requested food vouchers and had remained for months on a waiting list.

When I volunteered at the hub in August 2020, I also got to directly discover the changes in the ways in which the data of the beneficiaries was managed. I experienced the consequent change of tasks for volunteers. I was asked to help digitalise the data included on the self-

declaration sheets, including information on the reasons for needing assistance and on other forms of benefits received at household level. Entering the data in this system called "Municipality of Turin – SOLIDAPP - citizenship support applications" was not always an easy task. Partly because the information, handwritten on paper, was often hard to decipher. After entering a series of passwords to get into the system, I needed to decode and put in food recipients' social security number to find their profile. After a long series of attempts, changing Ss for 5s or Ns for Ms, the combination was finally right and I could transcribe the information.

Some sheets had been accurately filled in, in all their sections, others were missing information. However, in this digital environment it was not possible to close someone's file without entering information in all fields. When one of the community centre's employees passed by, I asked her for guidance on cases in which the question on basic income was checked, but the amount had not been specified. She explained that these were usually people who had benefitted from basic income but, for some reasons, had stopped receiving it: "they took it back from them" (*glielo hanno tolto*). "So… just put that they do not receive that income. In this way, you can move to the next question"[148]. Her answer and confident attitude made me think about the many different understandings and skills that social workers needed to develop to navigate and simplify Italian bureaucratic processes. It also made me feel, hands-on, these workers' margins for discretion, as also underlined by Herzfeld (1993) in his theorisation of bureaucracy.

Overall, in this section I asked if the presence of the municipality indicated a return of the state in the field of food aid. However, I revealed how the presence of the public administration remained linked and highly reliant on non-profit organisations. The fact that the municipality took over certain tasks such as the composition of the packages corresponded to a further restraining of the intervention both in terms of the quantity of food recipients and food distributed. Moreover, it came with new tasks being devolved from the municipality to non-profit workers, volunteers and food recipients

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[148] Fieldnotes, 04/08/2020.

themselves as examined in relation to bureaucracy and data management. With these final examples about data management at Via Agliè, I want to highlight the role of non-profit workers and volunteers in bureaucracy. As stressed before, the mediation of these actors extends the question of "biopower" beyond the state administration. I argue that this is an important consequence of contemporary welfare configurations such as community care: non-profit workers and volunteers play a central role in the evaluation of requests for support and in the management of personal data. They have the power to transform this set of information into bureaucratic keys that can guarantee or limit people access to certain services. Hyatt (1997, 219) highlighted that in certain regimes of welfare, the "government of the poor" takes place "through the mediation of an array of 'experts'" while in others it is devolved to the poor themselves. In this and other hybrid cases similar to such Italian arrangement of community care, it is important to question what expertise is deployed by volunteers, if any, how they feel about their growing responsibilities (e.g. Pusceddu 2020), and the consequences of such management of citizens' data.