SQUATTING AND RESISTING HOUSING INJUSTICE IN A PANDEMIC

MIGRANT SQUATTERS' POLITICAL CLAIMS AND COVID 19 EFFECTS ON HOUSING STRUGGLES IN ROME

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Abstract

As the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic unfold, it can be observed how in many countries the normative and economic measures implemented by governments are perpetuating already existing inequalities that overlap with class, gender and race. This thesis seeks to analyse the impact that the socio-economic distress caused by the Covid-19 outbreak has had on the condition, political claims and demands of migrant squatters in Rome. As not many studies have been conducted on this topic yet, this MA thesis aims at providing a scientific contribution to the existing state of research by shedding light on the current situation, contributing to the academic literature focusing on the interconnection between squatting and migration. This will be done by examining how the inequalities amplified by the Covid-19 crisis are opposed by migrant squatters, and how their political claims evolved in the months following the lockdown in Italy. The hypothesis is that the distress and precarity caused by the Covid-19 crisis will translate into radical political demands claiming a structural change which will potentially trigger a new season of struggles over the right to housing and hospitality.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Structure of the work

This thesis is structured as follows. This **first introductory chapter** aims at providing an overview of the housing situation in Rome, focusing on the housing market and the housing right movements present in the city as well as briefly describing the Italian immigration laws. In addition, some considerations on the Covid 19 crisis will be made to set the ground for introducing the research questions. The **second chapter** gives a short overview on the selected case studies and explains the methodologies adopted to analyse them, including the presentation of the interviewees and the limitations of the research process. The **third chapter** is the literature review, where the most pertinent studies on the relationship between squatting and migration in Rome will be discussed and the theoretical framework presented. More specifically, an overview on squatting as a practice and as a subject of research will be delineated, and the concepts of act of citizenship, acting political, disaster capitalism and cycles of struggles, upon which the empirical analysis is based, will be outlined. **Chapter four** displays the main results that emerged from the analysis of both interviews and Facebook posts, distinguishing between Baobab Experience and the three groups adhering to the Right to Inhabit Movements. Finally, the **fifth chapter** provides a final discussion on the findings, answering the research questions and offering some final remarks on the research process.

1.2 Approaching the subject: Housing and Housing resistance in Rome

In 2012, the applicants registered on waiting lists for social housing in Italy were nearly 630.000, and a survey conducted in that period showed that "approximately one million social housing units would need to be built" to overcome the Italian housing emergency (European Parliament - Employment and Social Affair , 2012). Despite the lack of affordable housing options, public expenditure on new housing development has declined across the EU (National Housing Federation, 2017). In Italy only the 3.7% of the total housing stock is social rent (EU average: 10,8%), with an astonishing 71.9% of owner-occupied dwellings (Housing Europe, 2017). As Aalbers rightly put it "where social housing was allowed to subsist, it was either subject to stigmatization […] or its management was commodified and rents were raised" (Aalbers, 2017, p. 543).

In addition, as Gentili and Hoekstra have highlighted, the highest vacancy rates in Europe are found in Mediterranean countries, creating a paradoxical situation characterized by high vacancy rates on the one hand and high house prices, and therefore people struggling to find accommodation, on the other (Gentili & Hoekstra, 2018). In the city of Rome, approximately 9.5% of the 1.300.000 dwellings are vacant, slightly above the 8% average of the other metropolitan cities (Figure 1) (Roma Capitale - Sito Istituzionale, 2011).
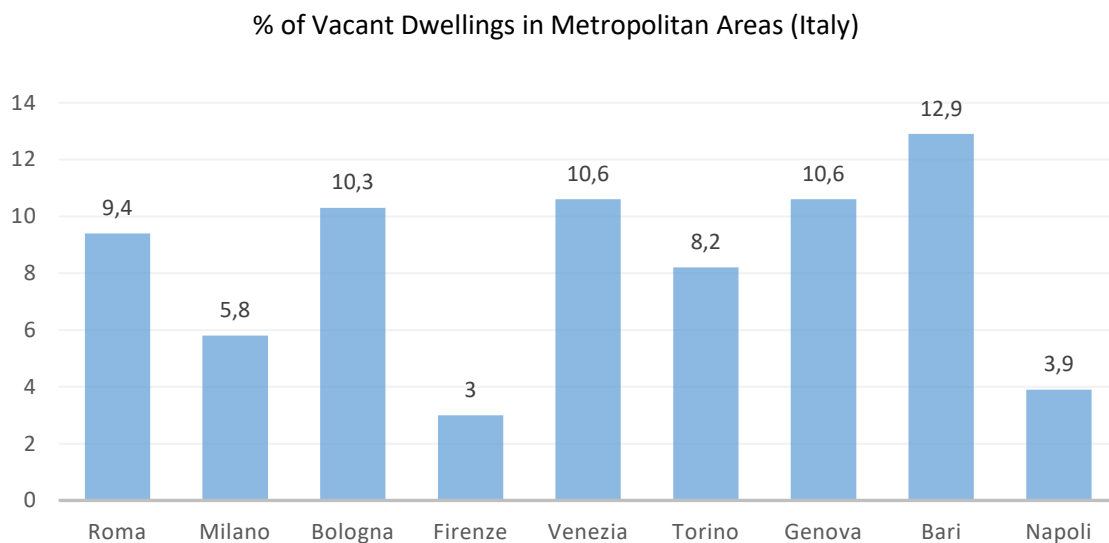
% of Vacant Dwellings in Metropolitan Areas (Italy)

9,4	5,8	10,3	3	10,6	8,2	10,6	12,9	3,9
Roma	Milano	Bologna	Firenze	Venezia	Torino	Genova	Bari	Napoli

Figure 1 - Vacant Dwellings per Metropolitan Area – Own Elaboration – data retrieved from Roma Capitale Sito Istituzionale

In 2015 the city announced that housing "is the most urgent economic and social challenge for present and future governments" with approximately 40.000 families exposed to homelessness risk (Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018, p. 698) and 16.000 homeless people. This is a paradox if we consider these numbers in the light of the previously mentioned vacancy rate of the Italian capital. The peak of the housing emergency has also coincided with an increase of arrivals (Nur & Sethman, 2017) and, as housing inaccessibility generates stratification and exclusion (Madden & Marcuse, 2016, p. 98), the inefficient Italian housing system has inevitably led to housing segregation and marginality. In fact, it is estimated that the number of homeless people is 50.000, with a 58% representation of foreigners (ISTAT , 2015).

As Arbaci has put it "housing represents the most critical and controversial of urban conditions for the settlement and inclusion of immigrants" (Arbaci, 2008, p. 609) that often find themselves in poorer housing conditions dictated by limited financial means, leading them to adopt informal and sometimes illegal solutions to find accommodation. This is the situation of many migrants in Rome, where the already problematic housing situation has been worsened by a substantial influx of newcomers. In fact, the city has recently become one of the main destinations of migrants in Italy, becoming an important gateway city in the European context (Attili, 2013). Indeed, Rome is the Italian city that hosts the greatest number of migrants, with 556.836 foreigners composing the 12% of the city population. (Rapporto Caritas Migrantes 2018).

The urban configuration of Rome, even before the arrival of migrants, has been deeply intertwined with the omnipresent housing shortages that characterized the city in the last century. Indeed, informal camps and squatting emerged as a direct response to housing problems, contributing to shape the city as we know

it today (Cellamare, 2010). Historically, the inhabitants of the Italian capital have not suffered passively the problematic housing situation, but on the contrary they mobilised to fill the gaps created by corrupted and inefficient city administrations. Starting from the aftermath of WWI, when people created informal settlements at the borders of the city to respond the increasing number of migrants coming for southern Italy, passing through the housing struggles in the 70s to provide inhabitants with social housing, until today with the squatting movements "Movimenti per il diritto all'abitare" (Right to Inhabit Movements), people have found alternative solutions to cope with housing shortages, offering pragmatic, yet marginal, solution to the city's tragic situation.

Just as natives have been doing, migrants started to develop alternative housing strategies to meet their housing needs. Due to the characteristics of the city, with numerous vacant houses and an active squatting scene, one of the most popular tactics adopted by migrants is to occupy empty buildings. In fact, it is estimated that migrants represent the 80% of the population living in squats, which is striking if we think that they are just the 20% of the population that is housed in dwellings found in the traditional housing circuit (Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018). In this regard, Rome represents a very interesting case to investigate the relationship between migration and housing struggles, and their role in the wider urban context.

The current situation shows that today's squats in Rome are much more heterogeneous than some decades ago, as migrants have widened the ranks of the precarious and low-income city dwellers. This assumes an even deeper value if we consider that the precarious situation of homeless migrants mentioned above has been aggravated with the introduction of article 5 of the *Piano Casa* law signed by Lupi and Renzi in 2014. With this new law squatting has been dramatically criminalized, as squatters cannot register their residence in the buildings they occupy, losing the right to access welfare services such as education and health care. Obviously, this can be a tremendous problem for migrants who need to have a residence to be able to access these services.

1.3 Borders Regimes Policies and Migrants' Mobilization

Especially throughout the last decades we have observed "an explosion of 'immigrant protests', political mobilization by irregular migrants and pro-migrant activists" (Tyler & Marciniak, 2013, p. 143) all over the world. The origins of these protests are to be found in the adoption of restrictive borders policies and strict immigration laws, which are resisted through actions demanding freedom of movement, the right to stay and the protection of human rights.

In fact, Rather than directly managing the phenomenon of migration, the policies adopted by the EU in the last five years followed a principle of externalisation, delegating the management of immigrants to the EU neighbouring countries in the Balkans and in northern Africa, financing them and offering logistical support. This is the same principle that has led to the agreement with the authoritarian and oppressive Turkish government in 2016, according to which Ankara would take care of the Syrian refugees sent back

from the Greek islands in return of EU funds for 3 billion euros (Fruscione, 2020). The same rationale was followed by the Italian centre-left government led by prime minister Gentiloni in 2017, through the agreement signed by the minister of interior Minniti and prime minister Fayez al-Sarraj of the Government of National Accord of Libya (GNA). This agreement, despite the numerous reports of its consequences, like the ill-treatment of migrants detained in Libya, was extended and reconfirmed last February. Amnesty International recently reported that "the authorities continue to unlawfully detain thousands of people in centres where they are subjected to exploitation, forced labour, torture and other ill-treatment" (Libya - Amnesty International, 2020). De facto, Italy, and by extension the EU, has signed a pact with a violent-militia-regime that by enacting measures that violate basic human rights prevent migrants entering Europe.

These unjust and unacceptable border regime policies have also had the effect of mobilizing both migrants and fringes of society that by putting in place actions of solidarity have supported the cause of the immigrants. These injustices are reported and fought against through collective actions that can assume different shapes according to the context, like peaceful marches, occupations of public sites or buildings, or riots. Studying these protests and how they intersect with already present social movements allow us to "better understand the ways in which refugees and migrants are important political actors who strategically mobilize resources, claims, networks, and develop political strategies" (Ataç, Rygiel, & Stierl, 2016, p. 540). By adopting these strategies, migrants on the one hand question the reception system and related policies, and on the other they emplace the rights they demand, performing what have been defined as "acts of citizenship" (Isin, 2008). Through these acts, they engage and contribute to give shape to the urban environment in which they dwell.

1.4 Moments of disrupt and opportunities: Covid 19 Crisis

These systematic and structural issues, although always present, intensify, and thus become more unbearable, in times of economic crises and social distress. In moments of emergency dictated by natural disasters, economic crises or wars long-neglected problems come to the surface at the cost of the most vulnerable groups. These times, due to the recent Covid-19 outbreak, represent a pivotal moment to investigate how structural problems ignored by governments are addressed, as they became too evident to be ignored and too unbearable not to be opposed by civic society.

All over the world, the health crisis has been used as a justification to close borders and further discriminate against migrants (The RHJ Editorial Collective , 2020). Border regimes have been toughened up by national governments, and many men and women have been stuck in our cities, as their journey has been temporarily interrupted. In this context, social movements had to rethink the way they could fight and protest against the injustices exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, as social gatherings and manifestations were not allowed. When quarantine policies were implemented, housing activists around the globe petitioned national governments and supranational institutions asking for the implementation of urgent housing

measures (The RHJ Editorial Collective , 2020). When this cry for intervention was not listened to, activists also opted for squatting empty buildings where homeless people could find shelter, like in the case of Berlin where activists, stating that "[i]n the current situation, the confiscation of empty apartments and buildings is a social duty" occupied empty apartments and Airbnb flats (#Besetzen, 2020). As soon as the restrictions have been partially lifted, many cities have witnessed demonstrations advocating for a restructuring of the housing, welfare and immigration system. It is too soon to speak of new waves of global social unrest, but the socio-economic drawbacks of the pandemic and the homicide of George Floyd in Minneapolis perpetuated by the police, have already mobilized masses across the globe crying for social justice. We are at the beginning of a new global economic crisis, and even if foreseeing the future is impossible, the impression is that these protests are just a taste of what is to come in the next months and years.

Although historically capitalism has managed to survive these crises by re-inventing itself through the adoption of free market "solutions", the recent covid-19 outbreak, and the consequent crisis, is definitely an unprecedented event for its magnitude and scale, that could possibly lead to a moment of rupture with the past. However, this was the hope also for previous crises. With the term 'disaster capitalism' Naomi Klein hints exactly at this aspect. She used this expression to discuss the roles that neoliberal economics have in creating the circumstances for, and subsequently respond to, crises in "ways that promote free market, for-profit corporate solutions that may succeed in creating company profits but ultimately fail in terms of democracy, fairness and justice" (Adams, 2020).

Nevertheless, disasters and crises not only create space for neoliberal responses that generate more inequalities, but they also create the circumstances for resistance and protests based on already existing political actors and solidarity networks (The RHJ Editorial Collective , 2020). The main intent of this research is to shed light on how the consequences of Covid-19 and the related policies, together with their socio-economic effects, have impacted and are impacting the condition of migrant squatters in Rome and thus their claims and demands. Attention will be paid to the perception of migrant squatters and activists on the current situation, specifically regarding the possibilities and political opportunities that critical moments like this one bring about. More in general, this research aims at providing a humble and little contribution to the critical urban studies field of research, revealing the paradoxes of capitalism and the injustices it fosters, especially in times of crises, producing and reproducing mechanisms of exclusion and exploitation. In this sense, by focusing on the potential of citizenship enacted through every-day resistance and housing struggles, I aim to unveil the contradictions of a reception and housing system that generate urban outcasts and discrimination. This will be done by trying to provide meaningful insights from homeless migrants who squat in Rome and that are engaged, directly or indirectly, in the politics of housing and migration. Analysing these phenomena in this historical time is deemed to be fundamental because, as it will be addressed later in the literature review, "in this world in which radical change seems so unthinkable, there are already

millions of experiments in radical change" (Holloway, 2010, p. 11). Focusing on these experiments and on people who are enacting them is crucial in moments of disruption like the one we are witnessing.

1.5 Research Question

In the light of the considerations made so far, the research questions that guide this investigation are as follows:

*RQ1: How have the political claims of migrant squatters in **the Right to Inhabit Movements** and **Baobab Experience** in Rome been influenced by the Covid 19 socio-economic effects?*

RQ2: To what extent do these two groups perceive the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity for a new cycle of protests and the achievement of their goals?

1.6 Operational Definitions and Aims of the Research

Before proceeding, it is necessary to provide the operational definition of some of the concepts and words used in the research questions.

To begin with, the definition of *political claims* that will be adopted in this research is the one introduced by Koopmans, namely "the purposive and public articulation of political demands, calls to action, proposals, criticisms, or physical attacks, which, actually or potentially, affect the interests or integrity of the claimants and/or other collective actors" (Kloopsman, 2005, p. 254).

Concerning the term *migrant*s, many definitions and discussion on the proper use and suitability of this term can be found in critical citizenship and migration studies literature. In this research, I use the term migrants to refer to people who crossed international borders (Çağlar & Schiller, 2018), without focusing specifically on refugees or asylum seekers. Despite the will to leave the definition of migrants open, most of the migrants that were encountered and analysed during the research were refugees and asylum seekers coming from Africa, the middle-East and Eastern Europe.

Lastly, by *Covid 19 crisis socio-economic effects* I mean all those problems and consequences like the loss of jobs, difficulties (and sometimes impossibility) to be eligible for the government subsidies, discriminatory access to health care, the impossibility of crossing borders, the impossibility of staying home due to homelessness, to which the most vulnerable groups, like migrant squatters, have been more exposed to.

2. Methodology

This research is a qualitative study that aims at reconstructing the political claims formation processes and the mobilization of migrant squatters. The city taken under scrutiny is Rome and the temporal frame is the period between January and July 2020, in order to observe the pre and post lockdown condition of migrant squatters. The subjects of the research will be *Baobab Experience*, an organization that provides assistance to an informal camp situated by the Tiburtina Railway Station, and three groups adhering to the *Right to Inhabit Movements*, a network of squatting collectives that manage a series of residential squats. Considering the multidimensionality of the subject, a mixed methods approach has been adopted, which employed interviews and social media analysis.

2.1 Case studies

The case studies are spatially and chronologically set in the city of Rome. I decided to focus on Rome because, as previously mentioned, it represents a context where housing shortage is paired with a consistent influx of migrants. As migrants in Rome are deeply involved in housing right struggles, I decided to focus on collectives and organizations characterized by a wide participation of migrants. The selected case stuies were Baobab Experience, Action, *ASIA USB* and Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (BPM). Whilst the latter three are all part of the Right to Inhabit movements, Baobab Experience is an independent association that for the moment does not adhere to any squatting network. As the focus of this research is on migrant squatters, these groups represented the perfect sample, since it was possible to take into account both the ones living in informal camps and the ones living in squatted buildings. What it is important to stress is that the aim of this study is not to draw a comparison between these two cases. On the contrary, the heterogeneity of these different cases is deemed to add value to the research as it shall contribute to have a wider and deeper understanding of the figure of the migrant squatter in Rome. The following is a short description of these actors

2.1.1 Baobab Experience

Guided by the slogan *"protect people not borders"* the first aim of the volunteers of Baobab Experience is to offer first aid to migrants who arrive in Rome from the south of Italy, providing them with food, tents, sleeping-bags and warm clothes, as well as medical and legal assistance with the support of NGOs specialized in these aspects. The association was born after citizens and volunteers organically started to help out the large numbers of people who arrived in Italy in 2015, in the middle of what has been later defined as *refugee crisis*. Initially migrants squatted a former reception centre called Baobab, after which the volunteers named the association when it was formally created in 2016. Few months after the building was occupied, migrants were evicted and from then on lived on the streets in informal camps. The location of these camps varied

according to the thirty-four evictions they were subjected to, although always remaining in the proximity of the Tiburtina train station. The three places where the camps were stable for longer periods were in Via Cupa (where the squatted centre was), Piazzale Maslax and Piazzale Spadolini, where the camp is located today. The numbers of the inhabitants of the camp varied consistently over time, ranging between peaks of three-hundred/four-hundred people and more modest numbers, like in the pre-lockdown period when only 50 squatters were living there. These fluctuations are present because most of the migrants that stop in Piazzale Spadolini are what Baobab volunteers call "migranti transitanti" (transiting migrants) who see Rome and the squat of Piazzale Spadolini as place where to rest before continuing their routes towards the north of Italy and Europe.

2.1.2 Action

Action, together with *Coordinamento Cittadino lotta per la casa* (Citizens Platform for the Housing Struggle) and *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani* (Metropolitan Precarious Block) is the most important organization involved in housing occupation and housing struggles in Rome (Mudu, 2014), and one of founders of the *Right to Inhabit Movements*, a joint venture of the above-mentioned groups. It was created in 2001 as part of a wider movement emerged in 1998 called *DAC -Diritto alla Casa* (Housing Right). In less than two years Action squatted five abandoned public buildings, until they decided to move to another vacant building owned by the Ministry of Defence. After a very long period characterized by peaks of tension with the police alternated to negotiations with the administration, the city of Rome bought 2000 dwellings to be designated to the families living in the squat. This unprecedented win has affirmed the role of Action within the housing struggles in Rome. In the first decade of the 2000s Action steadily occupied tens of buildings, with a peak of twenty buildings occupied in 2010, with thousands of families housed and involved in housing struggles. Today, as declared by one of the interviewees, Action squats six buildings, five of which are privately owned and one of which belongs to the Lazio Region, housing roughly 1500 people.
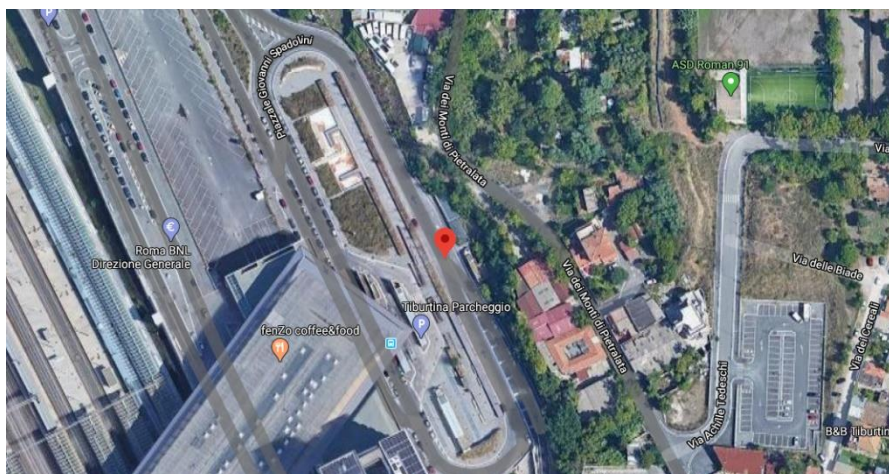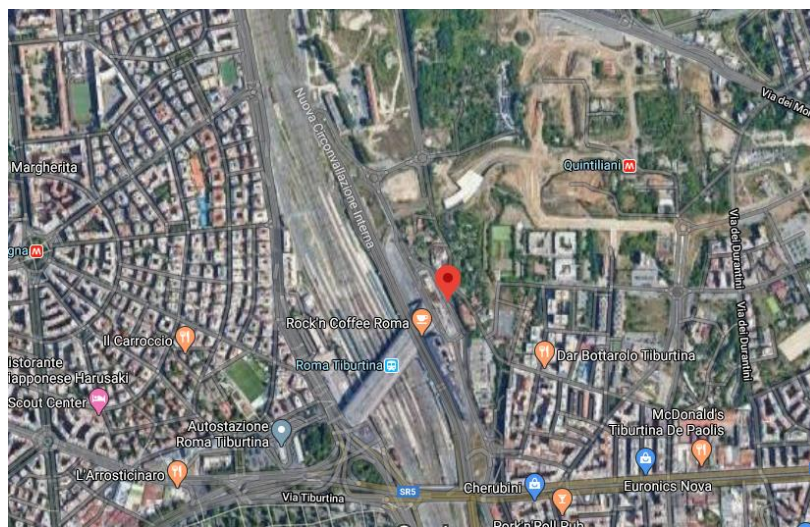
Figure 2 – Location of Piazzale Spadolini highlighted from three different distances - source: Google Maps

2.1.3 ASIA USB

ASIA USB stands for *Associazione Inquilini e Abitanti* (Association of Tenants and Inhabitants) and is an independent grassroots union. This means that ASIA is strictly tight to other grassroots unions operating in other fields, though all under the umbrella of USB (Unione Sindacale di Base), which is the most important grassroot union active both at the city and national level. In fact, ASIA USB, differently from the other organizations taken under scrutiny, is not solely active in Rome. On the contrary, most of the Italian cities are organized in a local branch of the union. However, ASIA USB – Roma is very rooted in the local struggles and is also an important actor of the *Right to Inhabit Movements*. Even before the creation of the USB national network, although with a different name, ASIA and its activists were already a point of reference for the housing struggles in Rome since the 1970s. As it has always been structured as a union, ASIA not only fights for housing employing the strategy of squatting, but it also defends the interests of the tenants living in private or public housing. This means that their mission is not only to obtain the universal right to housing, but also of public services, like transport connections and waste disposal (a big issue in Rome), reporting the conditions of many public buildings with heating, energy or water management problems, and offering legal support to tenants risking foreclosure or eviction. Currently, ASIA USB manages three occupied buildings in Rome, but it has a huge membership base of 10.000 people, as the regional coordinator of the union stated during his interview.

2.1.4   Blocchi Precari Metropolitani

Blocchi Precari Metropolitani (Metropolitans Precarious Blocks - BPM) is more recent than Action and ASIA USB. In fact, it was born in 2006 supported by people who were previously involved in Action. The approach of BPM could be defined as a very an action-oriented and pragmatic one, as squatting is largely used as a tool to regenerate empty and abandoned buildings using innovative techniques oriented at creating alternative forms of living (both in the ways squats are internally organized and in the way the space is arranged) also focused on sustainable solutions. At the moment BPM occupies former schools, health clinics and factories. The management and the use of the squatted buildings often move beyond the necessity to respond to a housing need. For instance, in the squat in Casal Boccone a theatre, *Teatro Caos*, was created in an auditorium before being used as a seminar room; in Metropoliz, probably the most famous of the squats managed by BPM, a street-art museum was created in a former salami factory where hundreds of people live. The most characterizing aspect of BPM, however, is the centrality of the role of migrants, who are actively involved in the cultural and creative projects mentioned above, but also in the housing right struggles the collective adheres to. Currently, BPM manages 7 squats of different dimensions that house roughly 700 people.

2.2. Research Methods

This MA thesis tries to answer the research questions by employing a qualitative toolkit of methods chosen in order to provide a deep understanding of the topic, and compatible with the movement restrictions imposed by the Covid-19 outbreak. The research was entirely conducted in my current location (Modena, Italy), except for some preliminary fieldwork in Rome from the sixth to the tenth of January 2020. As the case studies of the MA thesis were changed as a consequence of the pandemic situation, the content of the material gathered during those days has not been used as empirical data for this study. Nevertheless, it was very useful to get a more comprehensive understanding of the Roman context. The methods used were in-depth interviews, e-mail interviews and social media analysis.

2.2.1   Interviews | Initial and Pattern Coding

A total of 12 online interviews were carried out in the period from June to July 2020. Nine of these were in depth-interviews conducted in synchronous and "face-to-face" via the use of video-call applications like Skype and Facetime, while the rest (for the respondents of Action) were unsynchronized and sent by email. More specifically, a list of open questions was sent to the Action contact-person I was in touch with, who shared them with squatters that sent me back the questions sheet once filled. The interviewees were reached thanks to the volunteers and activists that administrate the Facebook pages of the associations taken under scrutiny, who acted as a bridge between me and the squatters, providing me with the personal contacts of the people who agreed to be interviewed. The scheme of the interviews could vary slightly according to the themes that spontaneously emerged during the interviews and depending on the role that the interviewee had within the association. In general, the main themes touched upon in all the interviews can be divided as follows:

1. Personal information and role within the association
2. History, development and internal organization of the association
3. Relationship with/role within the *Right to Inhabit Movements*
4. Roles of migrants within the squats
5. Covid 19 Socio-economic effects (how it impacted migrant squatters' daily life and conditions)
6. Migrant squatters' claims and demands
7. Perception of the current and upcoming situation (social and economic distress, effect on housing struggles, roles of migrants in the future)

All the respondents were either activists or squatters, or both. Unfortunately, the number of migrant squatters interviewed is not as high as I was aiming for, due to a series of limitations like trust-issues, the

impossibility to contact them directly, language insecurity, and in some cases limited familiarity with the programs used for the interviews. Eventually, only three interviews were conducted directly with migrants. However, their claims, roles and condition were addressed in depth with the other interviewees who are in contact with migrant squatters on a daily basis.

Name	Interviewee code	Nationality	Role	Gender	Association
Andrea Costa	BB1	Italian	Volunteer and Coordinator of Baobab Experience	M	Baobab Experience
Mariadele Falcone	BB2	Italian	Volunteer	F	Baobab Experience
Giulia Rampel	BB3	Italian	Volunteer	F	Baobab Experience
Valerio Bevacqua	BB4	Italian	Volunteer	M	Baobab Experience
Gregorio Calvarino	BB5	Italian	Volunteer	M	Baobab Experience
Yonova Rossy	AC1	Bulgarian	Migrant Squatter and Activist	F	Action
Fabrizio Nizzi	AC2	Italian	Activist and Squatter	M	Action
Salvatore Porretto	AC3	Italian	Squatter	M	Action
Not Given	AC5	Italian/Nigerian	Squatter	M	Action
Michelangelo Giglio	AS1	Italian	Activist	M	ASIA USB
Adam "Bosch" Nor	AS2	Senegalese	Migrant Squatter and Activist	M	ASIA USB
Madalina Gavilesku	BPM1	Romanian	Migrant Squatter and Activist	F	Blocchi Precari Metropolitani

Table 1: Interviewee Overview

Once the interviews had been transcribed, I coded them using the program Atlas.ti 8. After a scrutiny of the different coding methods, I decided to use *initial coding* as a first cycle method and *pattern coding* as a second cycle method. I opted for initial coding as it allows a certain freedom, enabling the researcher to have a first overview of the data and "reflect deeply on the contents and nuances of your data before […] taking ownership of them" (Saldana, 2009, p. 81). As a second cycle method I employed pattern coding, to group and summarize the flow of information encountered in the first reading of the data in order to identify recurring themes and patterns.

2.2.2 Social Media Analysis | Initial and Longitudinal Coding

Beside interviews, a social media analysis was carried out. This was done by analysing the content shared and posted on the Facebook pages of the four organizations introduced above. The material collected was

shared in the period from January 1ˢᵗ to July 15ᵗʰ. I decided to focus on this time frame to be able to see the changes in the "political agenda" and the actions of the four case studies in in the months before (January-February), during (March-April-May) and after (June-July) the lockdown in Italy. After a preliminary research on the kind of use the four organisations made of social media, I observed that the platform most used to publicly communicate was Facebook. This social media, thanks to its layout and the numerous options of content-production and sharing, allowed me to draw from different kinds of communication methods, both textual and visual. Analysing the content-production of the organisations in a chronological order was useful both for implementing the information collected in the interviews, but also for highlighting the evolution of the claims and actions employed by them to respond, and cope with, the new distressing situation caused by the outbreak of the virus. In total, 150 pages of text were analysed and coded.

Just like for the analysis of the transcripts of the interviews, I adopted a *two cycle coding* approach to the data. The text has been firstly analysed using *initial coding*, for the same reasons outlined in the previous section, and then categorized using *longitudinal coding*. I opted for this second-cycle type of coding because one of the aims of the research is to outline the changes and evolution of the migrant political claims over the last months. Longitudinal coding offers a template that allows the researcher to categorize and compare the data collected over a period of time. More specifically, the data are organized into seven descriptive categories: 1) increase and emergence (what emerges and decreases through time?); 2) Cumulative (what is cumulative through time?); 3) Surges, Epiphanies, and Turning Points (what kind of surges, epiphanies and turning points occur through time?) ; 4) Decrease and Cease (what decreases or ceases through time?) ; 5) Constant and Consistent (what remains constant and consistent through time?); 6) Idiosyncratic (what is idiosyncratic through time?); 7) Missing (what is missing through time?) (Saldana, 2009).

2.3   Reflection on Research Process, Challenges and Limitations

The research process of this MA thesis, like for any researcher who is conducting a study in these times, was accompanied by a higher degree of uncertainty and insecurity than usual. Initially, the idea was to compare two squats in Rome I was already in touch with, and conduct an ethnography using interviews and observant participation as my methods. Since travelling and moving within Italy has not been allowed for approximately three months, from mid-March until the beginning of June, I had to completely rethink my approach. However, this limiting situation allowed me to reflect on the role that we have as (novel) researchers, especially in these times of economic and social distress. After troubling months and a lot of thinking, I decided to slightly change the topic of my thesis adapting it to the current situation. This choice was informed by the need to give voice and space to groups often invisible to institutions, trying to understand the discriminatory mechanisms they are subjected to particularly in times of crises.

Doing fieldwork in a pandemic obviously required the employment of methods compatible with the impossibility to move and be close to people. A series of limitations arose, especially for qualitative research.

However, I think that the situation did not impact that much the interviews as such, as I would have asked the same questions in person and it was still possible to create a connection thanks to the video. Moreover, I think that the fact that interviewees responded from a safe and known place, like their homes or offices, made them more comfortable in answering the questions. In addition, I believe that since they had the opportunity to end the call and disconnect whenever they wanted somehow balanced the researcher-interviewee power relation. For the unsynchronized email interviews, more limitations arose. If it is true that the respondents had more time to reflect on the questions and to formulate their answers, in many cases they gave partial answers, while in some other cases they said interesting things I would have asked them to elaborate upon if the interview was in synchro. Indeed, the video-call interviews were significantly longer than the ones sent out via email. The biggest obstacle of all was to be totally reliant on other people for recruiting interviewees, not being able to select them. This led to an underrepresentation of migrants in the interviews, namely only three out of twelve. This limitation was partially overcome by interviewing the other nine people, who could be considered as experts on the topic since they live, collaborate, and engage in political activities with migrants every day.

Regarding the analysis of the Facebook posts, I think that however helpful to reconstruct the context, these methods cannot replace participant observation. Nevertheless, one of the pros of analysing this data was to be able to observe a chronology of the events, mapping the changes of the claims overtime, a goal that would have been harder to achieve with "less structured" methods like the one of participant observations. Moreover, since the content was self-produced by activists and squatters, the information found on their pages perfectly suited the aim of this research, as they use this media mainly as a platform to express their claims and demands.

To conclude, I think that using these methods, mostly new to me, was challenging but also rewarding. Once I stopped trying to replicate what I would have done in person and focused on the potentialities of the methodological tools I was using, I discovered new ways for addressing such a complicated topic and observed aspects I would have not considered if I used more "traditional" qualitative methods.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Studying Migration and Squatting in Rome, a State of the Art

The purpose of this subsection is to provide a state of art of the publications of scholars who investigated the phenomenon of squatting and the ways in which it intersects with migration in Rome. The Rome housing situation has been an important subject of research developed in Italy in the 70s and 80s. The informal expansion of the city and the creation of *borgate* (informally built suburbs) and abusivism became central in the political and academic debate of those years ((Clementi & Perego, 1983; Della Seta & Della Seta, 1988; Ferrarotti, 1970; Berlinguer & Della Seta, 1976; Martinelli, 1986) that have seen a flourishing

contribution by scholars approaching these topics from different perspective. These studies are in some cases very thorough and empirically founded, while in other cases they are more oriented to the denunciation of the problem (Cellamare, 2010). In any case, they have been the foundation of the future research of scholars interested in the topic.

After that period, the attention on the housing situation in Rome has relatively faded, although it recently became more and more addressed and a studied subject of research. This because the city is found to be particularly interesting due to the well-structured and organized housing right movement, emerged in the city in the aftermath of World War II and since then always present in the Roman political arena. Mudu (2014), one of the most prominent scholars investigating the housing struggles in Rome, identified four different phases of resistance against discriminatory and unjust housing policies:

The first phase, between the 1950s and the 1970s, was principally led by the Italian Communist Party (PCI). In the 1970s the emergence of organisations from the extra-parliamentary left changed the characteristics of resistance trajectories, and the PCI was no longer the sole main actor (Balestrini and Moroni, 1997). From the beginning of the 1980s a third phase developed […] where the action of organisations from the radical left was not directly linked to any political party, and groups experimented with new ways of action. The first decade of the 21st century represents a fourth phase in the struggles for housing, because both the level of mobilisation and networking have increased significantly." (Mudu, 2014, p. 135)

I believe that being aware of the history of the development of housing struggles in the Italian capital city is crucial to better frame today's situation. The approach of Mudu is focused on understanding the structural conditions and internal composition and organization of Movimenti per il diritto all'abitare, and its role in offering not only a "welfare from below" but also "an alternative way of inhabiting the city" (Mudu, 2014, p. 158). Even though understanding the importance of an actor like Movimenti per il dirtto all'abitare in the city of Rome in crucial, and Mudu successfully outlined its history, actions and role, he paid less attention to the formation and evolution of the claims of the "large [group] of heterogenous people" that this movement has put together (Mudu, 2014).

A similar approach has been adopted by other scholars like Nur and Sethman (2017) in studying the intersection between migration and mobilization for the right to housing in Rome. With their contribution they highlighted the central role that migrants have assumed within the housing right movements. With their work they acknowledge the political activity of migrants and their access to the political space they are omitted from at the institutional level and the way this "manifests a concrete formulation of an emergent urban citizenship" (Nur & Sethman, 2017, p. 78). Even if the themes of activism and citizenship are of great importance also for this thesis, and they will be discussed further in the next sections, these two authors'

contribution tends to be too analytical and descriptive. In fact, rather than understanding the mechanisms that affects migrants claim-making in relation to the experience of squatting, they offer an analytical description of the different types of squats inhabited by migrants in Rome. Again, even if the role of migrants in the right to inhabit movements is well outlined, the process for the formation and the evolution of their political claims is overlooked.

More attention has been devoted to these aspects in the work of Montagna and Grazioli (2019), who employed the concept of urban commons to distinguish between "organized" squats where processes of sociability were developed and enhanced, and less organized ones that followed more unstructured and individualized forms of living. The authors have done this by comparing three different examples of squats in Rome, comparison that has led to the conclusion that squats:

"configure urban and mobile commons if they are structured as secure, liveable spatialities where migrants can forge reliable solidarity networks, create safe spaces of mutual care, exert their autonomy and freedom of movement" (Montagna & Grazioli, 2019, p. 589)

Squats in Rome have also been studied considering their relationship with institutions and the role they play in providing practical solutions to structural problems often neglected by the city administration. In particular, the connection between the right to inhabit movements in Rome and the external environment and its actors have been the object of investigation of Davoli (2018), who studied how movements interact with *political powers*, *repressive-punitive powers*, and *other subjects with economic interests* (own translation) (Davoli, 2018, p. 10). By focusing on these aspects, the author found out how the different actors that compose the right to inhabit movements network take a different stand regarding the relation with institutions. In fact, some of them tend to be more confrontational and autonomous while others adopt a more collaborative and "institutional" position, following the idea that institutions must be changed from within. Informal settlements and squats have also been considered as a practicable way out to overcome the disastrous housing system, framed as "possible form of housing policy that would be able to sustain social inclusion of immigrants in Rome" (Fioretti, 2011, p. 12).

To sum, researchers and scholars interested in the case of squatting and migration in Rome have mainly focused on the following objectives:

1) Frame the structural causes that have led to the creation of a Right to Inhabit movements and its role in providing alternative solutions to house people;

2) Provide an analytical description of the different categories/types of migrant squats;

3) Pinpoint the characteristics that a squat inhabited by migrants must meet to be defined as "virtuous";

4) Understand the relationship between the housing right movements and institutions;

5) Investigate whether squatting could represent an organic solution to the housing problems in Rome;

Whilst all these contributions are at the basis of my work and have inspired my theoretical approach in different ways, my aim is to shift away from the goal of providing analytical descriptions or highlighting the structural problems at the origin of these phenomena. As I will contend in the next section, I argue that the processes that influence the political claims of migrants are multi-faceted and influenced by structural conditions but also by their squatter identity when it comes to reacting to, contesting and resisting those conditions. I speak of identity because I think that the very decision of entering illegally in a building or occupying unlawfully a public space, creates a collective identity, a squatter identity, that is opposed to the role of the State. This contraposition is the basis of the conflict between these two groups, that are ready to fight in order to defend their rights, on one hand, and the rule of law, on the other.

I believe that their everyday experiences and struggles should be the starting point to understand how external conditions and events intersect with their position as political subjects. The next section will be dedicated to introducing the theoretical tools I will be using to address these aspects.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

As the research will draw on different fields of studies, the structure of the literature review will be divided into different parts. The first subsection aims at proposing the most relevant and influential approaches adopted by scholars when studying squatting, while advocating the need to take a distance from the attempts to categorize such an heterogeneous phenomena, which I argue should always be considered as political. The political is the main focus of the following two subsections, respectively devoted to the introduction of the concept of cycles of struggles in the frame of disaster capitalism, and on the meaning of acting politically in what has been defined as a post-political era. The aims of these two sections is to position the phenomenon of squatting within the contentious dynamics going on at the urban level, in order to unveil the role that squatting movements have in resisting and offering an alternative to the dominant neoliberalism paradigm, especially in times of crises when this system tries to survive through "disaster capitalism" policies. Finally, the last sub-section aims at providing evidence of the tight relationship between migration and squatting, together with a reflection on the concept of citizenship, focusing on how the practice of squatting can be considered as an act of citizenship.

3.2.1   Beyond Categories: The intrinsic political connotation of squatting

The basic definition of squatting is the practice of illegally occupying unused buildings, which are taken and used without the owners' permission (Cattaneo & Martinez, 2014). Despite the illegal component of the

act of squatting, the focus of the authors dealing with this topic often moves beyond the mere definition of squatting as a deviant and illegal behaviour. Indeed, this subject can be approached from different angles focusing on a number of different aspects and several strands of research on this topic can be identified in academic literature. While some scholars focus "on the squatters' agency and identity issues" (Martinez, 2018, p. 5) other researchers are more interested on squatters' ideological background, whereas others investigate the structures and external conditions affecting the emergence of squatting movements (Bouillon, 2017). Among these scholars, Wates has identified what he considers the key variables for squatting to occur, namely a shortage of affordable housing paired with a high number of vacant properties (Wates, 1980), conditions that are both present in the case of Rome. However, I argue that squatting is more than the result of constraining structural conditions but, as Martinez puts it, a bottom-up political "intervention at the core of urban politics" which openly challenges the established power by breaking the law and by providing an alternative to the dominant urban growth paradigm (Martinez, 2012). As squatting is a very heterogeneous phenomenon that can include practices very different from each other, authors have attempted to categorize it based on the aims and motivations of squatters. The most famous and discussed categorization is without any doubts the one introduced by Prujit (2013). The author proposed a typology consisting of five configurations or types of squatting: deprivation-based squatting; squatting as an alternative housing strategy; entrepreneurial squatting; conservational squatting and; political squatting (Pruijt, 2013, p. 21). Although these categories represent a helpful analytical tool to orient the researcher, the critique moved by other scholars is that "drawing an ethnographic picture of squats in terms of rigid classifications is bound to fail", due to the heterogeneity and the continuous variations that squats go through during their life span (Bouillon, 2017, p. 68).

Despite the attempts of scholars to provide nuanced categorizations to analyse squatting, the most common distinction found in the literature on this subject is still the one that distinguishes between squatting as a way of meeting a housing need and political squatting. As my arguments goes on, I take a distance from these categorizations and from this simplistic binary distinction, since I believe that the action of squatting is per-se political, even when it is the consequence of contingent basic human needs. In fact, the cycles of squatting in Europe followed trends that can be linked to moment of distress and crisis, proving how these realities emerge to fight the harmful effects that a neoliberal housing system express especially in times of crisis, through what have been defined by Klein (2017) as "disaster capitalism" policies. This theme and the political connotation of the action of squatting will be further discussed in the following sections.

3.2.2   Cycles of Struggle in the frame of Disaster Capitalism

The pioneering contributions of Sydney Tarrow, who employed the concept of cycles to study political fluctuations and protest waves, represented an innovative way to understand the changes in society

putting at its fore moments of disruption, agitations and unrest. The author defines cycles of protest as "crucible in which moments of madness are tempered into the permanent tools of a society's repertoire of contention" (Tarrow, 1993). The use of the concept of cycles hints at the systematic reoccurrence of widely participated protests alternated to periods of decline in mobilizations. Tarrow goes on to argue that it is possible to identify a number of attributes that characterized waves of protest in history, namely "heightened conflict, broad sectoral and geographical extension, the appearance of new social movement organizations and the empowerment of old ones, the creation of new 'master frames' of meaning and the invention of new forms of collective action" (Tarrow, Cycles of Collective Action: Between Moments of Madness and the Repertoire of Contention, 1993, p. 284). The protest cycles approach also allows us to unpack the ongoing mutations of movements in relation to the political and historical context.

According to this approach, movement organizations are believed to be of great importance in cycle of protest because protesting and pursuing contentious collective actions is their main and often unique resource (Tarrow, 1993). In moments of protest, triggered by certain events, it is quite rare that new movements suddenly arise, whilst is more common that the ranks of already existing movements are widened by an increase in participation. The repertoire of actions and expertise of movements is thus central in orienting new cycles of protests when they arise. The definition introduced by Tarrow refers to massive waves of protest that occur in a broad geographical area, pivotal moments in the history of the western world. This contribution does not have the ambition of providing a global, and not even European, analysis of the current agitations in Europe and locate them in the chronology of struggles of the last decades, but it rather focuses on the specific case of Rome and on some components of its urban social movements.

This change in scale still allows to draw from the contribution of Tarrow to frame the current situation of contention present in the Italian capital. In fact, like other authors[1] have shown with their work, it is possible to apply the cycle of protest approach to investigate the evolution of struggles of a specific social movement within the network of movements present in a given city. What particularly interests me about this theory is the way in which it deconstructs the different events and factors that have led to the outbreak of a protest. By doing so, it is also possible to speculate on the possibility that new cycles of protests will occur on the basis of present events. Inspired by these concepts, Martinez and other scholars adopted this theory to study the evolution of squatting movements in different countries across Europe (Martinez, 2018).

My approach will be partially based on their work and will attempt to recognize in the current moment specific traits that in the past have made new cycles of struggle emerge. Their approach can essentially be defined as an historical one, aimed at reconstructing the chronology of cycles in different European cities, highlighting the peaks of struggle and understanding the conditions that fuelled these

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[1] (Martinez, 2018; Debelle, Cattaneo, Gonzalez, Barranco, & Llobet, 2018; Mudu & Rossini, 2018; azozomox & Kuhn, 2018; Steiger, 2018; Piazza & Martinez, 2018)

moments of contestation. In my case, as mentioned above, the concept of cycles of protest will be used to assess whether the dramatic socio-economic effects of the Covid-19 crisis could lead to a new cycle of struggle over the right to housing. In fact, the socio-spatial structures in which we are all embedded can create the conditions for sparking new cycles of struggles that potentially lead to the obtainment of a certain goal, or hinder them by thwarting and inhibiting the actions of activists.

In the publication Urban Politics of Squatters Movements (Martinez, 2018) the contributors offered a series of examples of the application of the cycle of protests theory on the study of squatting movements in several European cities. While the periodicity of squatting cycles varies from one city to the other according to their socio-political and legal context, we see almost everywhere an exacerbation of protests in certain moments. Common patterns have been observed especially in southern European cities, like in the work of Piazza and Martinez (2018) who identified some parallelisms between the evolution of squatting in Spain and Italy. Since the beginning of the 2000s, they observed what could be defined as a common cause of struggles in different cities, aimed at contesting the financialization and speculation rating trump in those cities. The authors identified in the 2008 global financial crisis a pivotal moment, characterized by an increase in the use of squatting as a tool to manifest the dissent towards austerity measures and to cope with the effects of the economic crises. It is not a coincidence that exactly in that period very important social actors emerged in the cities taken under scrutiny by the authors. More specifically, the 15M, PAH and Indignados movements in Spain, and the Right to Inhabit Movements in Rome that in 2013, through the *Tsunami Tour*, have occupied ten buildings with the participation of hundreds of people.

Each global economic crisis in recent history, no matter its causes, has been followed by mass protests and agitations. This because the price of these crises is paid by the most vulnerable parts of society, which become larger in times of economic distress. Even if housing problems, precariousness of the job market, discriminatory access to basic human rights and other plagues affecting our times are present in moments of "stability" as well, the explosion of the discussion around these topics emerge when these rights are neglected to larger fringes of society, and the groups that were before safe find themselves exposed to the risk of losing their privileges.

The occurring of an economic crisis is by definition a disruptive moment, often framed by institutions as "unpredictable" or "unprecedented". These moments of rupture put at the fore basic human needs, like the one of shelter and of survival. The fact that economic crises are unpredictable, as they are integral and fundamental parts for the reproduction and subsistence of neoliberalism, is highly questionable. There are cases, however, when economy is brought on its knees by environmental or natural disasters. The 2020 Corona crisis, in this sense, represents a suitable example. Even if there is more and more evidence of the human responsibility in the processes that led to the disaster caused by the outbreak of the Covid 19 virus, most of which can be traced back to the opulence and anthropocentrism that characterize the ways in which our societies and lifestyles are shaped, let's assume that this recent disaster was completely unpredictable.

Even if we do so, one question remains: how have we produced so much health and social vulnerability to find ourselves in such a crisis? Covid 19, foreseeable or not, intensified pre-existing vulnerabilities that must force us to rethink about topics such the privatization of health, the outsourcing of production of necessary goods (like respirators and protection masks), and the cuts on welfare with all of its social consequences, housing included. The violence with which this new condition of emergency has hit the lives of many showed how much our societies are built on injustice and unfairness. Still, the fact that we are aware of these systemic deficiencies does not automatically translate into structural reforms. As Naomi Klein puts it when speaking of the current situation "this crisis […] could well be the catalyst to shower aid on the wealthiest interests in our society, including those most responsible for our current vulnerabilities, while offering next to nothing to most workers, wiping out small family savings and shuttering small businesses" (Klein, 2020 as cited by The RHJ Editorial Collective , 2020).

Coronavirus capitalism, as Klein defined it, is the latest set of measures through which the basic infrastructures necessary for the subsistence of capitalism will try to be maintained. Paradoxically, even the emergency policies implemented to economically assist the population could be seen as a way to avoid the collapse of a system rather than protecting people in need. As the RHJ's editorial collective write:

"Who, and what, are these measures really protecting? Who is being really saved by emergency programs advanced by those same institutions that have allowed for financialized, precarious, dwelling to become the norm across the spectrum? […] If everyone were to be evicted, if no one could pay their mortgage, and in the unhoused were allowed to legally occupy vacant property, what would authorities, the state, and global capital do?" (The RHJ Editorial Collective , 2020, p. 12)

The post-disaster neoliberal policies and their application were studied in depth by Klein in her book *The Shock Doctrine* (2017). One of the pillar concepts of the authoress' work is the one of disaster capitalism. Disaster capitalism, as described by Klein, is a set of policies that tries to preserve the established capitalist system in "ways that promote free market, for-profit corporate solutions that may succeed in creating company profits but ultimately fail in terms of democracy, fairness and justice" (Adams, 2020). The argument is that in previous crises dictated by natural disasters or economic crashes, capitalism, through its institutions, has managed to reinvent itself investing in new markets "created" ad hoc to keep the capital moving, war industry in the name of geopolitical security being the most evident example of this mechanism.

However important, rather than focusing on the tools employed by the capital to sustain the economic system on its basis of exploitation and precarity, the focus of this Master thesis will be on the opposition to these policies and on the effects they produce. Indeed, the aim of this contribution is to understand the inconsistencies of capitalism by focusing on its contradictions and weaknesses, and on the

ways social actors contest them. Before proceeding, it is necessary to contextualize these struggles by spending a few words on the urban political frame within which these clashes take place.

3.3 Acting Politically in the Post-Political City, Hammering a Wall full of cracks

Although the definition of *post-political* varies from author to author, it is tendentially referred to a context where the space once devoted to contestation and political antagonism has been taken over by all those formal institutions that set the borders of political confrontation in representative democracy. In other words, the political has been colonized by politics. According to Mouffe, in democratic systems antagonism is reduced in terms of "agonism", a non-conflictual version of the former (Mouffe, 2005). In this context, what was called "the enemy" becomes "the adversary" and "a compromise or solution is to be found" (Milligan, 2016, p. 17). In the post-political condition of our societies, the antagonistic dimension has been repressed in favour of the hegemony of neoliberalism, creating a condition for a closed and selected discussion (Mouffe, 2005).

This post-political condition, flattening and inhibiting antagonism and confrontation, brings about "a return of the repressed, in the form of right-wing nationalism and religious fundamentalisms, which give expression to the antagonism that has been eviscerated from the domain of democratic contestation" (Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014). The hegemonizing neoliberal model has thus dramatically reduced the plurality of voices that should be part of, and create the condition for, social democracy. This has led to an extremization and radicalization of stances aimed at overthrowing that very same model. As Mouffe argues in the following quote, this homogenization of the political arena threatens democracy.

"The recognition of social division and the legitimation of conflict […] brings to the fore the existence in a democratic society of a plurality of interests and demands which, although they conflict and can never be finally reconciled, should nevertheless be considered as legitimate" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 119)

Without deepening Mouffe's advocacy for radical democracy, what I intend to extract from her contribution is the emphasis on the effects that neoliberalism and the repression of political conflict has had on the radicalization of political agents. Since the post-political connotation characterizing our times has created t the premises for a radicalization of the repressed, it is exactly from the repressed that we shall start to analyse how the established system of power can be challenged and eventually replaced. It is not just religious fundamentalism or far-right nationalism that have re-emerged due to the absence of political discussion, but also social and radical-left political movements that are often criminalized and stigmatized. In fact, as Rowan Milligan argues "the agonistic politics that attempts to convert the "enemy" into "adversary", does not fully reflect the experience or reality of squatting" as in this case the distinction us-them is still very

present and the relation between the parts (squatters and State) is a violent one, better described as antagonistic than agonistic (Milligan, 2018, p. 19).

It is incontestable that since the 1970s neoliberalism has had a terrific impact on democratic processes in cities and countries around the world, restructuring them in order to be more appealing to international markets and private actors. However, confusing the size of this economic restructuring and its effect on the political agenda with a hollowing of all the alternative political projects present in a city would be a terrible mistake. As Larner argues, going beyond the hopelessness that the neoliberalism project seems to bring about would allow us to see all those political actors, strategies and conflicts that are confronting this apparent monolith, shedding light on its contradictions and weaknesses (Larner, 2003). Especially in moments of crises, like the one in which this research is being conducted, it is important to shed light on the cracks of the capitalist system and on the frictions emerging from the contraposition between social groups and state. As Holloway holds it "the method of the crack is the method of crisis: we wish to understand the wall not from its solidity but from its cracks; we wish to understand capitalism not as domination, but from the perspective of crisis, its contradictions, its weaknesses" (Holloway, 2010, p. 9). Squatting and squatters' actions open a small breach in the wall, and however small the breach is, it still shows that an alternative is possible and, why not, replicable.

Urban movements and urban resistance thus represent a perfect entry point to understand the political tensions and conflicts that characterize the post-political city. The increase in presence of these political actors has been interpreted as a return of the political, dictated by the spreading inequalities and injustice that neoliberalism has contributed to disseminate (Dikec & Swyngedouw, 2017). Surely, it is not a coincidence that radical movements usually emerge where the adverse effects of capitalism hit stronger: the city. In fact, as Lefebvre has argued, the urban is at the same time the place where the capitalist society is organized and the field that potentially creates the condition for revolutionary struggles (Lefebvre, 1968). The urban environment leaves the space for alternatives that challenge the dominant political-socio-economic paradigm, as Swingedouw has put it:

"The post-political 'glocal' city is fragmented and kaleidoscopic. […]. Within the tensions, inconsistencies and exclusions forged through these kaleidoscopic yet incoherent transformations, all manner of frictions, cracks, fissures, gaps, and vacant spaces arise; spaces that, although an integral part of police order, of existing state of the situation, are simultaneously outside of it" (Swyngedouw, 2007, p. 71)

Squats represent these kinds of spaces where the gaps forgotten by the hegemonic neoliberal system are filled with alternatives that challenge the State and, more and more, global economic actors. Arguing that squatting is inherently political does not mean that all squats are the same, or that all squatters are

driven by a certain political will or ideology. However, as the act of breaking into an abandoned building or occupying public spaces implies also the breaking of the law and an open confrontation with the State, this action represents in all its forms and connotations a political stand against the unequal conditions that the State has let happen. Most importantly, squatting challenges one of the fundamental and founding institutions of the modern State: private property. This is also the reason why the conflict between squatters and the State cannot be pacified and normalized as one would expect in contemporary representative democracy, because it is questioning the core of the existence of the State.

As mentioned previously, the cracks and fissures that authors like Holloway and Mouffe have put at the fore of their contribution, become wider and more visible in times of crisis. It is not a coincidence that "squatting […] again came to the fore in 2008, in the aftermath of the global financial crisis" (Martinez, 2018, p. 1). The intersection of these structural conditions and the agency, claims and choices of migrant squatters is exactly what this study tries to pinpoint.

3.4 Migrants, Squatting as an Act of Citizenship

As Tyler and Marciniak have argued, "immigrant protests constitute critical counter political voices, highlighting and protesting deteriorating conditions for irregular migrants and refugees 'on the ground', exposing the violence engendered by border control, and challenging the abstract and fetishized political rhetoric of 'illegal migration" (Tyler & Marciniak, 2013, p. 143). Since the beginning of the 2000s there has been a sharp increase in migrants' protests around the world, as a result of the criminalization and injustices just mentioned. These protests can take different forms according to the claims and problems faced by migrants, but as this thesis focuses on migrant squatters, I will be focusing particularly on this form of contention. If we want to understand migration processes we need to interrogate inhabitation as well, as questions of who decides who should be moving and who should not are intrinsically related to who has the right to inhabit places (Boano, 2019 as cited in Katrini, 2020, p.30). The establishment of housing squats and the use of squatting as a tool, marked an important shift in migrants' struggles that turned from "acts of protest [into] performance of resistance" at the urban level (Dadusc, 2019, p. 503). Indeed, in a context in which migrants are stuck because of limited possibilities of movements "migrant housing struggles become a challenge to this policy of containment" (Montagna & Grazioli, 2019, p. 578)

In the literature on this topic, a lot of attention is paid to the relations between activists and the migrant squatters, and on the processes of empowerment and politicization that the latter experience once in contact with the former. In the book *Migration, Squatting and Radical Autonomy* (Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017), Mudu and other scholars have investigated through a series of contributions the ways "squatting has offered an alternative to dominant anti-migrant policies, and the implications of squatting on the social

acceptance of migrants" providing empirical evidence of the forms that the relationships between these two groups can assume (Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017, p. 1).

Moving away from categories and forms, Bouillon argues that housing squats inhabited by migrants always raise political matters (Bouillon, 2017). More specifically, the author argues that squats must be defined political for three reasons:

1. *They result from the political mechanisms involved in governments' migration and housing policies (also questions such as labour policies, racial discrimination, urban management policies and the criminalization of squats);*
2. *They epitomize the need for everyone to have a proper roof over their head;*
3. *They constitute a political arena because they are meeting-places where migrants come into contact with people from other social environments.*

(Bouillon, 2017, p. 75)

The act of squatting, though, does not necessarily lead migrants to be more successful in obtaining their rights or affirming their claims, as the agency of migrants is just part of the story and in many countries migrants who decide to squat are exposed to high risks. Structural conditions, such as the solidarity and protection expressed by other groups, the receptiveness of the local population, the degree of repression put in place by the city, and the degree of criminalization of squatting are obviously very influential in this sense.

The involvement of migrants in radical squatter movements and housing right struggle surely influences the ways discourse on "the nexus of victimage (migrants as powerless victims) or security (migrants as dangerous security threats) and precarity (migrants occupying menial or illegal jobs) are resisted" (Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017, p. 2). As Nur and Sethman argue, the mobilization of migrants through the action of squatting is "not only (a way) to access housing but also (a way) to exercise citizenship that was denied to them in the national political space" (Nur & Sethman, 2017, p. 83). We live in a world where the rights of private property and profit rate trump all other notions of rights, and in this context migrants' rights, citizenship included, are tendentially neglected if they are not considered to be a valuable economic asset. In other words, like Tayler argues, citizenship has become "a vast and proliferating bureaucracy from which flow categories of people marginalized by, excluded or disqualified from citizenship and the rights which flow from this status" (Tyler, 2010, p. 10).

The matter of citizenship represents "a focal point of debates about borders […] and migration" (Nyers & Rygiel, 2017, p. 1). The occupation of sites and spaces carried out by migrants has been defined as an *act of citizenship*, concept introduced by Isin (2008). The author defines citizenship not as something that can be assigned or revoked, but rather as a practice that people put in place in the form of mobilisation. Isin,

when speaking of 'acts' refers to "the practices through which subjects transform themselves into citizens" (Isin, 2008, p. 18). Often, an act of citizenship requires the questioning of the law, which in some cases has to be broken (Isin, 2008). Squatting can be considered as an example of such practices, as "non-citizen migrants enact themselves as political beings and de facto as citizens, despite lacking legal status, political membership or documentation of belonging" (Nyers & Rygiel, 2017, p. 9). The argument is that rather than an expression of citizenship, which reproduces forms of exclusion and inclusion, migrants' mobilisation has to be considered as a claim for rights that challenges the normative status of citizenship provided by the State. The contribution of Çağlar and Shiller is more centered around this matter: in their work they focus on how, what they call *sociabilities*[2], develop "in situations in which those who come together have unequal access to resources including information, skills and institutional networks. Yet social bonds, social cohesion so to speak, emerges from a perhaps limited but potent shared set of experiences, emotions and aspirations" (Shiller & Çağlar, 2015). Through this approach, the focus returns on people's subjectivies and actions, allowing the researcher to shed light on the circumstances enabling urban outcasts, migrants included, to create spaces where whatever rights they have been denied can be expressed via the occupation of a space. In some cases, the very act of occupying a space is a re-appropriation of a right that has been refused to be given (housing), while in some other cases this represents more a way through which other kinds of rights can be demanded.

In contrast with countries like the UK or Spain, where migrants from former colonies were more likely to obtain citizenship rights, countries like Italy, as mentioned above, have almost no institutional political space devoted for migrants and their claims. For this reason, the majority of migrants in Italy can only engage in alternative forms of political participation (Mudu & Chattopadhyay, 2017). One of these alternative settings is surely the squatting movement, that with its radicality is open to both consider migrants as equally important in terms of decision making and to give them the tools to bring their citizenship claims to a wider arena.

To conclude, what is interesting about the intersection of migration and squatting is that what we could define as a *political pragmatism* come into place, as migrants who are squatting for obtaining neglected rights, by re-appropriating a space are also performing an act of citizenship. The hypothesis is thus that since migrants are "those to whom the right to have rights is due" (Isin & Nielsen, 2008, p. 2) through squatting they manifest what Butler defined as "the right to have rights" (Butler, 2011).

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[2] "relations in which one "acts" as though all were equal, as though one esteemed everyone […] the meaning (that) these relations […] engender emerge from actors' mutual sense of being human" (Shiller & Çağlar, 2015, p. 3)

4. Fieldwork Data, Findings and Analysis

4.1 Part one: Interviews analysis

4.1.1   Socio-economic effects of quarantine politics

The restrictive measures adopted by governments around the world to prevent the spread of the virus have dramatically impacted our lives, limiting our freedom of movements and the ways we interact with each other. Even if most of us were equally subjected to these restrictions, we experienced them differently according to our economic possibilities and housing conditions. Thus, before describing the political claims and demands made by migrant squatters, it is necessary to outline the most evident socio-economic effects that the politics of quarantine have had on their lives and thus on their revendications.

As discussed previously, the condition of migrants is tendentially more precarious and fragile than the one of natives. This is because restrictive immigration laws, together with a discriminating housing and job market, tend to make the lives of newcomers harder. The pandemic has intensified this precarity, as an activist of Baobab Experience explains:

> *"Everything was stuck, everything stopped, they lost their jobs. The ones who didn't have a contract were obviously the first ones to lose it [...] the precariousness of work and the difficulties that this pandemic has brought about are mostly on an economic and social level." (translated, Giulia - Baobab Experience)*

The precarity of the conditions of squatters, and more specifically of migrant squatters, is another theme that is recurrent throughout most of the interviews. The reasons of this precarity, though, are not to be found in the outbreak of the virus but rather on the institutions that have allowed for financialized housing and precarious jobs to become the norm across the spectrum. The virus is not seen by the interviewees as the cause of this economic fragility, but as a trigger that, using the metaphor of Michelangelo "have made the volcano erupt":

> *"This whole pandemic made the volcano erupt... it has made clear and evident that especially in our country there is an amount of undeclared employment that probably is unparalleled in Europe, it is clear that with the pandemic many people have not even managed to find illegal occupations or flexible and more precarious jobs."(translated, Michelangelo – ASIA USB)*

The eruption of this volcano has deeply impacted the lives of migrant squatters, as for many of them accessing the state's subsidies was not possible due to the irregularity of their jobs or of their stay. Although even before the pandemic the economic situation of many of the squatters was dramatic, with the pandemic it became a matter of survival, as the ones who had irregular jobs relied on daily wages. With the loss of this

daily income, providing the family or themselves with basic needs became a challenge. As Fabrizio of Action told me:

"You can imagine. Most of the squatters have illegal or occasional jobs. No work, no food."
(translated, Fabrizio - Action)

However, even documented migrants and natives with regular jobs faced many difficulties in obtaining the economic help implemented by the national government. The neglect of State institutions in sustaining the most vulnerable fringes of society, and the difficulty to follow the cumbersome bureaucratic procedures to obtain the financial help, were two aspects brought up by most of the respondents. As Madalina, a squatter from Romania, told me:

"We stopped working at the beginning of March. We have been furloughed […] I'm working with
an open-ended contract, is a part-time, but at least it was a fixed income that gave me that little
security. So, I was furloughed, and I received only 430 euros on the first of June, meaning that
from March to June I had no income, I was in total despair. I did like everyone else who is in this
situation, I made the application for grocery vouchers which have not arrived yet. I was also
committed to make the application for many other people, I think there are 87 families who
applied for the vouchers and not even half of them have arrived." (translated, Madalina - BPM)

What emerged from the analysis is also that even If the economic distress caused by the pandemic equally affected squatters, the quarantine measures had impacted differently squatters who live in residential buildings and migrant squatters who are camped in Piazzale Spadolini. In the latter case, as migrants are de facto living in tents and thus homeless, the "Stay Home" slogan, very popular during the peak of the pandemic, sounded quite hypocritical. The contradictions of the immigration laws and of border regimes have never been so evident, showing the discriminating consequences affecting the lives of people who, as emerged in the interviews, have been considered invisible during the pandemic. This condition of abandonment by institutions, which will be discussed further later, led to tensions both among migrant squatters and between volunteers and migrants camped in Piazzale Spadolini.

"Stay at home, stay all at home…"yes but I don't have a home" is a phrase that all of them have
said, "where am I supposed to go?" "Why don't you give us a home, a place where to sleep?" So
yes, this frustration eventually turned into anger" (translated, Mariadele - Baobab Experience)

The living conditions of migrant squatters in Piazzale Spadolini were not only worsened by the exposure to the risk of infection and the possibility of being persecuted because they were not respecting the quarantine, but also by the restrictions on border regime policies implemented by Italy's neighbouring countries. In fact, the journey of migrants was interrupted, creating immobile subjects stuck in a place they did not choose with very limited freedom of movement (Borri, 2017 as cited in Montagna & Grazioli, 2019). This is an important aspect to consider since, as mentioned above, a consistent part of migrants who live in Piazzale Spadolini stop there only temporarily to take a break before continuing to move towards their final destinations in northern Italy or northern Europe. Therefore, transiting migrants got stuck together with the ones who were already settled there, and the numbers of squatters during the lockdown more than doubled, increasing from 50 to 120.

> *"We had an extremely high number of migrants […] because of the transiting migrants arrived before or even during the pandemic, who then got stuck there, and the ones who have lost their permit of stay during the lockdown because they could not renew it." (translated, Giulia - Baobab Experience)*

As migrant squatters in Piazzale Spadolini were mostly ignored by the institutions, they had the opportunity to gain some space by expanding the informal settlement. Piazzale Spadolini is a small square next to Roma Termini Railway Station (Figure 2), and since during the lockdown the station was closed they had the opportunity to use more space outside the station and to re-organize it in order to be able to keep a distance from each other, and to make it fit better their needs.

> *"The boys started cooking, collecting pots and making fire, they created a space during the Ramadan to pray like in a mosque, and water tanks with taps at the bottom from which they could shower were donated. So, the Covid situation from a certain point of view made living together more difficult, but on the other hand, since there were fewer people on the street and fewer controls, they have expanded and improved their condition and better-structured the camp" (translated, Gregorio – Baobab Experience)*

Activists and squatters of the Right to Inhabit Movements, whilst contesting the hypocrisy of the stay home mantra, seem to have respected the restriction imposed by the government. New rules were implemented within the buildings, they kept track of people who entered the squat and decided that squatters could not have friends and relatives over. In general, the contact among squatters was kept at its minimum, yet without stopping the actions of solidarity and mutualism more necessary than ever in those troublesome times. The degree of organization and coordination among squatters is also an aspect that was

considered to be of great importance by the interviewees, as managing a squat requires a lot of energy and attention, especially when facing the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Internal organization is considered to be essential to avoid the risk of infections within the squat, mainly to preserve the health of the squatters, but also because if the squat had become a virus hotbed they knew that media and right-wing parties would have used this news to further delegitimize and stigmatize them.

> *"Within the squats there have been very few cases, not only in Rome but also in other cities in Italy. However, as soon as they hear "squat" they say oh yes, of course" as if all the other cases throughout Italy were not a problem, it becomes a problem only if the people infected are squatters. With our squats always under the spotlight, I think we have responded well, and we have endured this period well." (translated, Madalina – BPM)*

What emerged from this preliminary part of the study is that, as predicted, the measures adopted by the government have deeply affected the lives of squatters and activists, both on a social and economic level. With the safety of entire communities and countries at stake, the quarantine politics have had unequal impacts across society. It seems clear that vulnerable groups, like off-the-book workers and migrants, have been overlooked and abandoned by institutions during the lockdown.

4.1.2   Organizing and Taking Collective Decisions During the Pandemic

These unequal effects have not been left unopposed by squatters, volunteers and housing right activists. As predicted, what emerged from the analysis of the interviews is a significant link between migrant claims made during the pandemic and the worsening of their socio-economic conditions. The public articulation of political demands, calls to action, proposals, criticisms, or physical attacks, have of course been influenced by the lockdown situation.

> *"It all stopped. Assemblies, meetings, gatherings. The situation of isolation in some cases helped the collective dimension, in other cases it instilled in people fear and distrust." (translated, Fabrizio – Action)*

As Fabrizio from Action says, all the physical moments of encounter have been paused during the pandemic. The condition of isolation has deeply hindered the collective dimension, as activists and squatters were not able to physically meet, but at the same time the condition of precariousness shared by squatters has led to actions of solidarity and mutualism as well as a renewed political activism oriented at finding solutions to pressing needs.

"Sure, we kept protesting. […] We tried together with the associations to bring food buskets to the families who were suffering the most, we organized ourselves with the "Spesa Sospesa", which helped a lot […] we would go to the supermarkets adhering to the initiative to get the food that was donated and distribute it to families" (translated, Madalina – BPM)

These acts of solidarity, aimed at filling the gaps created by the neglect of the state, were paired with more contentious practices to critique and politically "attack" institutions. These antagonistic actions were obviously guided by political claims and demands. Let us have a look at the themes that were more recurrent in the data analysed, presenting Baobab Experience and the three groups part of the Right to Inhabit Movements separately.

4.1.3 Baobab Experience Migrants' Claims

Intuitively, one of the most pressing demands expressed by migrant squatters in Piazzale Spadolini was to have a place to live, the right to housing. This demand, of course, was central also before the outbreak of the virus.

"They want a place, […] they complain that it is not fair that they are thrown out on the street, that there are these violent evictions, that people label them as criminals, that they can't get a job." (translated, Mariadele – Baobab Experience)

As we can observe in this excerpt, having a house would not only mean having a roof, but regain the dignity that the state has taken away from them. Living on the street leads to a series of stigmas and prejudices that deeply affect their condition of urban dwellers. During the pandemic, the abandonment of the institutions and the new health risks added to ones already present made migrant squatters consider more radical solutions bypassing institutional inefficiency.

"They have often discussed about squatting a building in this period, but unfortunately I think they would evict them straight away" (translated, Mariadele – Baobab Experience)

The solution of squatting a building was not adopted by migrants so far, for a series of reasons that emerged throughout the interviews: firstly, squatting a building requires a high degree of organization and know-how; secondly, they are under the spotlight and the police would probably evict them as soon as they break into a building: thirdly, this would also further compromise their legal status of migrants, and they would risk being deported.

"The problem is that for us this would also create difficulties, in the sense that they are migrants who the least are noticed the happier they are." (translated, Andrea – Baobab Experience)

However, their presence has not gone unnoticed. In fact, the municipality has evicted them 34 times since Baobab Experience came to life. This strategy of eviction and dispersion had led nowhere so far, as no alternative solutions were offered to migrant squatters in Piazzale Spadolini.

"They don't give us an alternative, and the problem is that they don't realize that even if you send them away from here… they are people, they are human beings, they don't vanish into thin air..." (translated, Mariadele – Baobab Experience)

The problem of accommodation and housing is tightly linked to the topic of hospitality. In fact, the critique to immigration laws and the inefficiency of the reception system is central in the claims made by migrants and volunteers. If usually the topic of freedom of movement is a central one for migrant squatters in Piazzale Spadolini, since a consistent part of them are transiting migrants, from the analysis this did not emerge as a central topic. Of course, the effects of immigration laws and border regimes came up frequently during the interviews, but they were not a topic of contestation during the pandemic. The focus of their claims moved from the right of freedom of movement, to the right to stay in decent conditions, especially during the lockdown, when the need to have a house and economic support was desperately expressed.

The demands for these rights were emplaced by sending three formal complaints to the municipality and organizing a sit-in in front of the city hall in May. More specifically, they asked the city and the government to adopt extraordinary measures to deal with the emergency:

"We made a little noise and raised our voices a little bit, so the Mayor Raggi felt cornered and said that there were five hundred places to house homeless people during the coronavirus emergency, nobody ever heard again of these five hundred places. We managed, only thanks to our efforts, to accommodate 21 people in a former SPRAR that had been opened for the coronavirus, but only 21 out of 150 people. So, the situation stayed as it was." (translated, Giulia – Baobab Experience)

These demands were articulated after being discussed in meetings and assemblies with migrants and activists. As one of the interviewees reports, Baobab Experience' protests are carried out on a more "symbolic level", in order not to expose migrants to the risk of being arrested and potentially deported. Formal complaints and sit-ins, indeed, were the only tools used to critique and lobby local and national

politics. When public protests are organized, however, the presence of migrant squatters is deemed to be essential, as well as their participation in the assemblies to decide the demands to bring to the institutions.

"We have had a sit-in on Wednesday in front of the city hall, where we (volunteers) really decided not to speak, we said you (migrants) decide, you speak" (translated, Andrea – Baobab Experience)

The involvement and participation of migrants obviously depend on the legal status of the migrant and on his/her time of permanence in Rome. As outlined different times in the interviews, the most politically involved migrants are the ones who have been living in Piazzale Spadolini for years and have decided to settle in Rome. Nevertheless, the long waiting times of the cumbersome Italian bureaucratic system lead also transiting migrants to spend months and sometimes years in Rome, intensifying the level of engagement with the city also thanks to the interaction with local activists and volunteers.

The interaction between migrants and volunteers gives life to a de facto citizenship, it gives them the possibility to be recognized by Italians within the territory where they live and, in any case, to be heard and improve their condition through the support and assistance that we offer. (translated, Gregorio – Baobab Experience)

Thus, migrants articulate their demands with the help of the experience of activists, enacting themselves as political beings. The claims made during the lockdown, starting from the material needs of migrants to be safe in the emergency of the pandemic, can be abstracted to the expression of a right to have proper hospitality, with the guarantee of an accommodation and consequently the need to reform the reception system so to provide migrants with the tools to be independent.

4.1.4 Right to Inhabit Movements

The intersectionality of the struggles carried out by the groups adhering to this movement can be perceived already by the name. Indeed, it is right to *inhabit* movements and not right to *housing* movements. Even if they put the need of social and affordable housing at the core of their struggles, squatters and activists of ASIA USB, Action and Blocchi Precari Metropolitani, seem to adopt an all-embracing approach to housing struggles, connecting them to wider themes all somehow related to the right to housing. This is explained well by the regional coordinator of ASIA USB, Michelangelo Gigli:

"ASIA has changed its name from "tenants' and assignees' association" to "tenants' and inhabitants' association" because [...] we link other struggles to the ones based on housing rights,

like the right to live in a more liveable city, the battle over mobility connection and the provision

of basic services like waste disposal, […] in the endless Roman suburbs." (translated,

Michelangelo – ASIA USB)

The Right to Inhabit Movements (RTIM), as noticeable in the previous excerpt, rather than focusing on the demand for a specific right, are calling for a relaunch of the welfare system that has been almost completely wiped out by the neoliberal policies adopted by national and local governments over the last decades. According to them, the neglect and the mismanagement of local administrations have led to geographies of exclusion and abandonment in the Italian capital.

"As squatters, we are not only manifesting for housing rights, but for everything that includes

work, health and study. That is, there are people here that…there are two neighbourhoods that

do not have public services, not even a clinic, there is nothing in that areas but private services."

(translated, Madalina – BPM)

Especially during the pandemic, it appears that the focus on certain claims has been emphasized, like access to health, need for a housing reform and the necessity for state support in times of emergency. As mentioned already, the problems afflicting the most vulnerable groups intensified during the lockdown and the consequent economic crisis. It appears that the exclusionary policies that were fought against by these movements in the last years have recently become even more discriminating. One of the most discussed and critiqued laws is certainly the Renzi-Lupi decree and, more specifically, the fifth article of this law. With this article squatting has been dramatically criminalized, as squatters cannot register their residence in the buildings they occupy, losing the right to access welfare services such as education and health care.

"We have been doing a very strong battle against Article 5, the famous Renzi-Lupi law that denies

the residence to those who squat house or a building. According to us, this is an undemocratic

and fascist decree. If you deny the residence there is no possibility to vote, to enrol children in

school, to have the tax code." (translated, Michelangelo, ASIA USB)

"But as RTIM we are not only fighting for the house but also against the infamous article 5 […]

which says that squatters do not have the right to have a family doctor, […] it takes away a lot

of rights" (translated, Madalina, BPM)

Obviously, this can be a tremendous problem for migrants who need to have residence to be able to access these basic services. Many of them have to go to the hospital even for minor things, as they cannot

be monitored and visited by a general practitioner. The paradox of this situation, in which the most vulnerable are discriminated against also when it comes to the provision of basic human services, is well exacerbated by Adam, a Senegalese political refugee arrived in Italy almost 20 years ago.

"I can tell you that we do not have other options, we are forced to squat because the state does not do what it is supposed to do, especially for us refugees from Darfur […] one who is recognized as a refugee, needs integration."(translated, Adam – ASIA USB)

The integration Adam is referring to is sometimes found by migrant squatters within the squat. The aim of this research is not to investigate the effects on migrants' participation in squatting movements, but it would be erroneous to think that their political claims, which are the subject of this study, are not influenced by their interaction with these groups.

"The reasons that push migrants to be part of the movement are of course linked to their will to join our struggles, but they are also influenced by the neutral principles of the movements, namely guaranteeing the people's rights and fighting to abolish all kinds of social discrimination." (translated, anonym – Action)

The vulnerability of migrants, however, accompanies their condition even after the empowering process they might go through when joining a movement. Indeed, even if they are considered as peers by native squatters, their condition remains more fragile than Italians. For these reasons, the involvement of migrants in protests and demonstrations is often limited by the risk of having harsh legal repercussions.

"Then there are those who are afraid, obviously we can't tell them to come and manifest on the streets, maybe they can get arrested and it can become a problem for them, everyone has to take their responsibilities and choices […] Everyone can decide whether to participate or not, we said we are in a situation of necessity […] most of them are foreigners and are afraid to get reported. I myself risk expulsion; in fact, on the 28th I will have a trial." (translated, Madalina – BPM)

As the situation of Madalina shows, the risks taken by migrants when contesting the state are higher than locals. However, many of them live in such frustrating and problematic conditions that they are left with no other choice but to adopt contentious actions and demonstrate also without a formal permission. This topic was brought up several times during the interviews, as migrants and squatters find themselves in a precarious balance between the choice to take the risk of protesting and the acceptance of their deprived

condition. Nevertheless, when the material means to survive are missing, as happened during the lockdown, many of the interviewees felt that there was not much left to lose, and thus decided to demonstrate also when gatherings were still not allowed.

> *"We also organized initiatives when there was still the ban on demonstrations […] for those who had made the request for the grocery vouchers and had not yet received them" (translated, Madalina – BPM)*

The demands directed to the institutions, though, were not only aimed at claiming the economic subsidies that the state had promised, but also at stressing the importance of introducing structural reforms to tackle the root causes of the problems afflicting migrant squatters. The privatization of services and the adoption of neoliberal policies are topics that linked all the interviews like a red thread.

> *"We must return to claim the welfare state in all its aspects. This is the best way to be able to resist and relaunch the struggles to change the situation in this country." (translated, Michelangelo – ASIA USB)*

This shows how, even if migrant squatters' claims are guided by the demand of basic services the state is failing to offer, the materiality of their struggle is entrenched in a vision for fairer and more equal society. The specific articulations of these claims during the pandemic will be addressed further in the social media analysis.

4.1.5 Opportunity for a change

What has been interesting to discuss during the interviews is the perception that activists and volunteers have of the current moment. There is no doubt that the Covid-19 socio-economic crisis, as discussed in the previous sections, worsened the conditions of many and unveiled the contradictions of neoliberalism. When asked about whether this event can represent a trigger for social change, the interviewees did not have a common and shared position about it, but they rather provided their personal perception of the situation. This is probably due to the fact that as a matter of fact we are still inside this period and having a clear view of what is happening around us is difficult.

Nevertheless, most of the activists, volunteers and squatters surveyed, see this moment as a crucial one, as they argue that the uneven effects of this crisis, added to the previous conditions of economic disparities, are unbearable for the most vulnerable and not only.

"Actually, this is a perfect time to make ourselves heard, us, who are invisible, […] (a moment) in which every community must take to the streets and demonstrate, in my opinion. Because this is the right moment to start going on a different direction." (translated, Adam – ASIA USB)

According to Adam, this is the time to make the *invisibles* visible to the public eye, breaking the veil that kept them unseen, overlooked. The "eye-opening" potential of this moment has been outlined by many other interviewees. Another example is Michelangelo, who said:

"I think we have reached a point where we can no longer have ambiguities, let me make this point: we must understand that the political forces that previously declared themselves as leftist, are not leftist at all. Is it a leftist value to implement and accept neoliberal policies that have continually massacred the job market, the proletariat and the working classes? […] we must not go ahead with this ambiguity, either we are on the side of the poor people, on the side of the workers, on the side of rights, or we are on the side of capital." (translated, Michelangelo – ASIA USB)

Michelangelo, like many other radical-left activists I had the chance to talk with in the interviews, sees the centre-leftist political parties as a lid that keeps down the potential of the working classes and organized movements. Their hope is that the disrupting times we are living in will draw the line between the political forces who promote a "real" left agenda, and the ones that promote neoliberal policies disguised behind leftist symbols. Thus, a need to keep high the protest is identified:

"As far as we are concerned, we are fighting because this is not the time to stop, but to raise the bar. In this period, we can also see the difficulty and the mismanagement that have led to this situation" (translated, Madalina- BPM)

Yet, the experience and long-lasting militance of some of the activists interviewed, made them be a bit more disillusioned when analysing the current moment.

"Initially, at the beginning of the Covid phase I was almost sure that the situation could have become better for everyone, in the sense that the inequalities came to the surface, so to say. Unfortunately, I was then a little bit proved wrong a little bit, in the sense that yes, there was something… but I don't see much new. I think it's still a long way before being able to form a new movement out of all the events that have recently occurred, a stronger and more decisive movement that demands real change, […] It is all yet to be seen, we have to see what happens

this fall, the students, the migrants, the workers who will have lost their jobs, there's a lot to

see." (translated, Andrea – Baobab Experience)

To sum up, the interviewees seem to open a space for potentially different scenarios and actions of resistance, depending on the consistency of their struggles as well as on a collective understanding of the causes linked to the economic system that led to today's problems. A need to have a wider network of solidarity including people who were not engaging with politics before is thus deemed to be essential.

"As I was saying before, we also organized initiatives when there was still the ban […] people

who were just passing by approached and demonstrated with us, because they were in the same

situation, they told us 'let us know when you demonstrate again' " (translated, Madalina, BPM)

So, as the general economic distress is thought to increase in the following months, the interviewees see the possibility of widening their ranks due to the adhesion of fringes of society who were not involved before, just as happened in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, when the high participation in the Right to Inhabit Movements allowed them to squat ten buildings with a coordinated set of actions remembered as the *Tsunami Tour*.

4.2 Part two: Social media analysis

In this section, the results that emerged from the social media analysis of the Facebook pages of Baobab Experience, Action, Blocchi Precari and ASIA USB will be presented. As mentioned in the methodology section, the codes created during the first cycle analysis were re-organized chronologically month by month in order to see the evolution of the claims over time, more specifically from January to mid-July 2020. The results will be shown distinguishing between Baobab and Right to Inhabit Movements.

4.2.1 Baobab Experience

The first post analysed dates back to the 8th of January. At the beginning of the year, before the virus outbreak, the main topics discussed were housing and racial discrimination. A series of experiences where migrants were discriminated against were reported, denouncing the latent racism characterizing real estate agencies in Rome:

"Excluding, marginalizing, depriving someone of their rights and possibilities just because they

come from another country is a crime, it is the death of humanity, it is something that we will

always fight against." (translated, January 16th, 2020)

These reports, though, were not accompanied by any act of contestation. Rather than addressing the institutions and demanding for a change, the communication was more focused on showing the activities they organized to fill the gaps created by the state, like assisting migrants to find accommodation and organizing workshops and language classes. This tendency went on until the end of February, when countries around the world started to implement travel bans from and to Italy. The limitation to movement adopted by many nations around the world was considered as a "worthy lesson" to all those who praised the closure of borders to limit the entrance of migrants in Europe. However, rather than stressing the lessons we could all learn from this situation, the accent was put on the worsened situation that many migrants were going through at the sealed margins of Europe, stuck in a no man's land.

"Tens of thousands of refugees are pouring into the border between Turkey and Greece in an attempt to find shelter in the European Union. The blind violence of Greek law enforcement in their implementation of collective rejections is causing the first victims. The right to asylum, a fundamental human right, which was already undermined, is now officially suspended. […] We call on Europe to shift the focus and the economic resources from the failed strategies of containment and rejection of migrants to the more resolutive and worthy solutions like humanitarian corridors, reception and integration projects. […] See you in the streets." (translated, March 3rd, 2020)

The fourth of March, the day after the publication of this post, a demonstration to contest the government and the mistreatment of migrants along EU borders was organized. The request to change European border policies has been the leading demand of migrants and activists of Baobab for weeks in that period. The priorities of claims started to change when the first limitations to movement were implemented on the Italian peninsula as a whole, around the middle of March. Consequently, the focus of attention turned from global to local, as the policies of containment of the virus started to manifest their unequal effects.

"#StayHome, but there are those who do not have a roof; ban on outdoor gatherings, but there are those who, in sharing an urban space, have found the only possible home […] There is the habit of always forgetting, even in an emergency, the very people who are the most fragile and most exposed to the dangers at the roots of the emergency itself." (translated, March 10th, 2020)

In order to pressure institutions, they lodged a complaint with the city asking for a housing solution, also temporary, to the migrants living on the streets. This complaint was ignored, and a week later a letter was sent to the Minister of Health Speranza, asking him to intervene. Also this time, their call on institutions was unheard.

In the impossibility to demonstrate and organize sit-ins, lodging complaints was the only act of contestation activists and volunteers could employ, together with the daily support offered to migrants living in Piazzale Spadolini. At the peak of the pandemic, in March and April, the level of emergency increased and so it did the level of militancy of migrants and volunteers, who consistently tried to lobby institutions to take action. While claiming the right to hospitality for the people living in Piazzale Spadolini, they also continued their struggles to guarantee freedom of movement to the ones more in need, like migrants arriving in Sicily after crossing the Mediterranean who got stuck on a boat in the sea next to the Italian costs because Italy declared its own ports "unsafe". As the calls on institutions were ignored, Baobab Experience started to demand the help of the citizens of Rome counting on their solidarity.

"Donating a blanket or a warm meal is a political act! Always. Now more than ever: there is an emergency within the emergency, that is the one of the last" (translated, April 12th, 2020)

As the infection rates and cases started to slow down, at the end of April there was an initial easing up of restrictions. At that time, the political discussion in Italy was focused on the possible problems that the non-arrival of seasonal workers from other countries would have brought to the Italian agriculture sector.

"(we) ask the Government and Parliament to proceed with a regularization of Foreigners in Italy […] The utilitarian approach characterizing the political debate in these days is unacceptable […] Human beings, not manpower. Rights and dignity, not utilitarianism. The regularisation is only a first, dutiful step and we believe it is necessary not to limit the proposal to certain productive sectors, which respond only to the need for the use of labour, but to target the proposal to all

those who live in Italy in conditions of irregularity or legal precariousness and who, through the residence permit, for work or expected employment, can emerge as people and not only as labour. Subjects of law and not only arms for work". (translated, April 23rd, 2020)

The right to citizenship is strictly linked to rights in the workplace, as well as its refusal is strictly linked to forms of exploitation. This topic is deeply felt by the inhabitants of Piazzale Spadolini, as many of them in spring and summer move to the south of Italy looking for a job in the agricultural fields. Saying that undocumented migrants employed in the agricultural sectors are underpaid and exploited would be a euphemism. The right to citizenship is not only claimed to give migrants better working conditions, but also because many of them have seen their status turning from "legal" to "illegal" during the pandemic, since the immigration offices were closed and their permit expired and their requests for hospitality frozen. Even if this is just a bureaucratic cavil, its effects on migrants' lives is very harmful, as they are excluded from basic services during a pandemic more necessary than ever. In May, the attention was kept on topics related to the problematic living conditions of migrants in Piazzale Spadolini and the neglect of the state in finding solutions, as restrictions continued to be slowly withdrawn. This led to a higher flow of people in the city and around the station, as commercial activities and workplaces reopened. At the end of the month, the first post-lockdown eviction was enforced by the city.

"Eviction and identification of migrants in Piazzale Spadolini: Ignored during #phase1 of the emergency #covid19 and left on the street without protection and exposed to the risk of contagion, now that #lockdown is over we are again considered a problem. Invisible while everyone was at home, in a deserted city, now that the world is repopulating and eyes are looking out again, we have to disappear. We are once again deemed to be indecorous. Dust under the carpet." (translated, May 25th, 2020)

Figure 4 - Eviction of the squat in Piazzale Spadolini, pictures taken by activists of Baobab Experience source: Facebook page of Baobab Experience

The eviction of the 25th of May was just the first of four, in four days. This event, together with the resonance of the homicide of George Floyd in the US, opened a period of mobilization and contestation towards institutions and their use of police and violence as a tool to avoid facing problems that do not disappear with evictions. Differently from the months of lockdown, when the claims made were somehow always directed at requesting prompt intervention in a moment of emergency, from the end of May the claims appeared more articulated and again oriented at demanding a systemic change and structural solutions. Baobab adhered to the Black Lives Matter protest in Rome and harshly critiqued the members of the parliament who kneeled in sign of solidarity to the black community, while not abolishing the discriminating Salvini security decrees as it would be in their power. From the 3rd of June, the restrictions to movement within the Italian peninsula were lifted, and organizing small demonstrations was again possible. Thus, a sit-in was organized for the 17th of June in front of the city hall.

Figure 5 - Poster announcing the sit-in of the 17th of June - source:
Facebook page of Baobab Experience

The title of the poster in the previous page reads: "The street is *your* choice". The topics and claims brought by protesters that day were several and were summarized in a post written on the Facebook homepage:

"We're here because hospitality is a right and you are the illegal ones. We ask for accommodation and immediate protection for migrants […] We are here, exhausted by two weeks of evictions and summary identifications. Taken to the Police Headquarters for interminable checks and then thrown back in the street. The same street from which you ask us to disappear. We're here because evictions are not a solution. […] you are ì asking us to DISAPPEAR. We are here to shout at you all your contradictions: not only do you not answer for your political responsibilities, but you are playing a war of nerves on human beings already

ravaged by a past of abuse and a present of insidious harassment.We're here to ask POLITICS. We are here, asking for an end to institutional hypocrisy: the street is not our choice. It is the choice of those who ignore our rights of protection and hospitality... [...] We're here because we're not invisible. Even if you keep looking the other way, we still exist. We are here because Politics is a serious matter and what we have been witnessing for months (not to say years) is an embarrassing reshuffle of responsibility between the different institutional levels: Municipality, Region, Ministry of the Interior. We are here, after we lodged 3 complaints and wrote an open letter, we were completely ignored. Abandoned in Phase 1 of the health emergency, with so many pats on the back and encouragement, tolerated because we were (again) filling the institutional void, we are now uncomfortable and indecorous again. (translated, June 18th, 2020)

Figure 6 - "4 evictions in 4 days" Migrant squatter protesting in front of the city hall - source: Facebook page of Baobab Experience

Figure 7 - Migrant squatters' of Piazzale Spadolini protesting in front of the city hall – source: Facebook page of Baobab Experience

I decided to choose this excerpt from the posts analysed because I think it summarizes well two aspects. Firstly, the most pressing demands and claims made my migrant squatters of Piazzale Spadolini: the right to hospitality, the right to housing and, more in general, the right to be heard, to be listened to, not to be ignored. Secondly, the escalation of events of the last months and the evolution of the relationship with state institutions, initially more formal and collaborative and then, after being ignored, a more conflict-oriented strategy based on the frustration witnessed by the inhabitants of Piazzale Spadolini.

4.2.2 Right to inhabit Movements

Even if the posts were analysed separately for *ASIA USB*, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and Action, I will here consider them as if they were all "produced" by the same entity. This is because they are all part of the RTIM and their claims, even if formulated in different ways, were coordinated and followed the same patterns in the last months. Before proceeding, however, it is necessary to outline that Action compared to the other two groups has been much less active on Facebook. Thus, the material analysed was very limited.

In January and February, the topics of contestation were mostly related to the housing situation in Rome and the lack of affordable housing. During this period, squatters would meet regularly in what they call people's assemblies (assemble popolari), some of which were held in front of the palace of the Region, where the regional council would gather to discuss housing policies. The main requests made by the RTIM were to have a structural housing reform based on public housing policies, the regularisation of squatters and to stop evictions.

Figure 8 - Poster announcing the demonstration of the 29th of January (on the left) and a picture of people demonstrating in front of the regional council (on the right) source: Facebook page of BPM

"On January 29th at 11 a.m. the Right to Inhabit Movements in Rome, the tenant's grassroots unions will meet in the assembly in via della Pisana [...] A fundamental moment of encounter and confrontation to follow the discussion happening in the council on important and urgent issues. [...] The urgency to implement public housing policies that are not dictated by emergency is now more important than ever [...] We expect interventions that will put in place significant resources to support a new season of public housing, also using the vast heritage of empty and unused buildings." (translated, BPM, January 26th, 2020)

The recurrent events and protests in front of the Regional council in via della Pisana characterized the initial part of 2020 of the Right to Inhabit Movements. The relationship with the council has been at times antagonistic and conflictual (with high tension between police and activists) and at times collaborative. In

general, activists and squatters demanded to be involved in the decision regarding the housing policies that the Region wanted to implement. As emerges from the excerpt above, the main demand is to move beyond emergency and ephemeral solutions to put together a plan to solve once and for all the long-lasting housing problems in Rome. Another request articulated in this period was the abolition of the Salvini security laws, as they are believed to criminalize migrants and limit the right to protest.

Figure 9 - Tension rising between protesters and Police in front of the Regional Council – source: Facebook page of BPM

At the beginning of March, the first effects of the pandemic started to impact the activities of the movements, as gatherings in big numbers were no longer possible. Already-planned assemblies and sit-ins were cancelled, as the topics slowly started to be more and more linked to the spreading of the virus. The prison revolts, consequent to the restrictions on the rights of inmates (outside visits) and the impossibility to keep a distance in overcrowded cells, triggered a wave of solidarity expressed by the movements that claimed for amnesty and temporary house arrest to guarantee the safety of inmates during the pandemic.

Figure 10 - Banner hung outside a Prison which reads "Outside one meter from each other, in Prison eight in one room" – source: Facebook page of BPM

As the lockdown was expanded to the whole country, RTIM asked for emergency policies to help people cope with the economic crisis. The stop on evictions and the suspension of mortgage payments were included in the government decree of the 17th of March, aimed at supporting families in a time of economic suffering. These policies, however, were not deemed to be enough by the RTIM, since no mention was made of the payment of rents and house bills.

> *"We strongly urge the competent institutions to implement emergency policies to cover the costs of rent and bills as well as the suspension the payment of rents where necessary. This moment of great emergency and the consequent crisis that is being created shows how central the relaunch of public policy is to the right to inhabit and how urgent it is to intervene also in the future with regard to the right to housing, both with regard to the increase of public housing and the need of new regulations to limit the private market […] We believe that this situation of severe crisis and uncertainty should not weigh further on the shoulders of the weakest and already severely affected groups, we need urgent concrete responses from the government!"(translated, ASIA USB, March 18th, 2020)*

During that period the limits of the Italian health system were starting to become visible, as hospitals could not keep up with the increase of infections in those days. As these problems were unfolding, RTIM put a lot of attention on analysing them and considering the structural causes that made the health system so weak. These causes were found in the financial cuts on public health implemented in the last years, and on the privatization of the national health system. In a context where getting proper health assistance became expensive, RTIM claimed the right to health and the need to abolish the laws that limit it, especially for squatters.

> *It is precisely from this crisis, made more macroscopic by the unexpected entry of the COVID-19 pandemic -which highlights the fragility of our country as a consequence of the destruction of public health and all public policies for housing - that ASIA-USB launches a call for the defense of public health, for the cancellation of all laws that discriminate agaisnt the poor (art. 5 and the entire Renzi/Lupi Decree of 2014), to relaunch a ten-year national plan for one million social housing (using existing assets. " (translated, ASIA USB, March 22nd, 2020)*

The demand for state's subsidies for renters' expenses and suspension of rents accompanied the mobilization of RTIM activists for months. In general, the topic of health and housing were treated as deeply interconnected, being both affected by policies of privatization that limited their accessibility to the lower fringes of society, fostering exclusion. Although the wider picture was never put aside, during the months of

the pandemic RTIM's demands shifted from being more "structural-oriented" to being more "emergency-driven". One example of this is the struggle carried on, particularly by BPM, to obtain an emergency income for people struggling to survive. As protesting was not allowed, they launched a mail-bombing campaign, and in one day thousands of emails were sent to local, regional and national authorities. Even when policies to sustain the ones who were most hit by the crisis were implemented, the movements harshly critiqued their insufficiency and exclusionary character, as only certain profiles could benefit from them. The parallelism between the request of emergency and structural reforms was explicit also in the claim-making articulation of the RTIM's actors, as sometimes they were split into *now* and *post-emergency* claims:

> *"During the emergency:*
> - *Suspension of rents, payment of utilities and housing solutions for all;*
> - *Unconditional emergency income for all those who have lost income or are unemployed, which includes a specific supplement to support housing expenses that may also include those who, by necessity, have turned to the irregular market to find housing;*
> - *A specific measure to prevent evictions for rent arrears accumulated during the health emergency;*
>
> *Once the emergency will be over, we ask for:*
> - *The abrogation of the law 431/98 to stop the free housing market by introducing a affordable rent for social housing;*
> - *a plan to increase and improve public housing.*
> - *taxing with specific rates the forms of renting shorted than 30 days (B&B), destinating these resources to public housing." (translated, ASIA USB, April 27th, 2020)*

In April, the tension among squatters and activists started to increase, as no significant measures were taken to face the tragic economic consequences of the pandemic. Indicators of this tension are the "threats" that the movements would direct to institutions in that period, like breaking the mandatory home confinement and protesting in the streets if actions were not taken immediately. The tension also rose between police and squatters in buildings where some inhabitants tested positive to the virus. The most evident example is probably the one of Palace Selam, a building housed by hundreds of migrants. The squat is self-managed by the inhabitants and detached from organized movements for housing rights. Nevertheless, the roman squatting scene showed solidarity to the squat, which was surrounded by police and militaries for one week during the lockdown, making it impossible to leave the building.

Figure 11 - Military monitoring the squat Palace Selam – source: roma.corriere.it

Moreover, what was contested in that period was the fact that a residency registration was demanded to apply for financial help, a condition that would have excluded thousands of people. After wide pressure on institutions, this law was declared unconstitutional and thus changed to allow everybody to access subsidies. However, as mentioned above, these measures were not deemed to be sufficient, and the situation became unbearable by the end of April. Squatters decided to break the ban on gatherings and on the 30th of April BPM organized a sit-in in front of Parliament to request the financial help that the State promised to distribute and the suspension of rents and bills.

Figure 12 - Protesters demonstrating and violating the bans imposed by the government – source: Facebook page of BPM

This protest was just the first of a series of public contestations organized in the following months. Towards mid-May, the accent was put on the delay on the provision of the grocery vouchers, on the need for an emergency income, and on the disbalance in subsidy provision for workers compared to the economic support given to companies.

"The Decree that has just been approved by the Council of Ministers […] appears to be a great gift for the relaunch of production in companies, while very few resources are allocated to the last of the social ladder: the unemployed, the precarious and the so-called "untitled", who are often without residence and a home and that are left really alone with only crumbles in their hands, if they are lucky enough to receive them. This list will get longer, including small businesses and independent workers impoverished by the crisis, which will have to choose between eating, health and survival, or paying rents, mortgages and bills." (translated, BPM, May 15th, 2020)

Figure 13 - Demonstration to Claim the Grocery Vouchers promised by the State – source: Facebook page of ASIA USB

As restrictions were lifted and the situation started to get better, RTIM's claims began to be more focused on the post-pandemic situation. What was outlined several times was the necessity to offer more support to renters, since no measure was introduced to help them pay rent and thus exposed them to the risk of eviction for rent arrears. This condition of precarity led the movements to threaten a rent strike, although from the posts analysed it is not clear whether this was actually implemented as a strategy or not. They speak of a "national mobilisation for rent strike" but it is not specified in what this mobilisation consists.

Following the tendency of May, in June and July the topics started to address more structural problems rather than advocating for emergency solutions. The privatization of the health system, public services and housing, the need to move past the discriminatory housing policies in Rome, and the exploitation of off-the-book workers, especially migrants, became central topics in those months. An example is the "empty baskets" demonstration organized to protest against the dramatic working conditions of migrants working in the agricultural fields in the south of Italy.

In sum, the claims of activists and squatters of the Right to Inhabit Movements swung between a structural level, like the request of a housing reform, the nationalization of basic services and the abolition of what they believe to be discriminatory laws (Salvini decrees, Art. 5 of Legge Renzi-Lupi), implementing

policies to guarantee workers' rights, and a more "emergency" level, like the need to stop evictions and foreclosures, to economically sustain citizens during the pandemic, to give amnesty to inmates and regularize the exploited seasonal migrant workers in the south of Italy. The parallelism between these two kinds of claims proceeded coherently in the period analysed in this study, as the basic rights claimed were the right to housing, the right to work and the right to health.

5. Conclusions
5.1 Discussion of the Results

After presenting the results of the interviews led with squatters and activists and of the analysis of the texts written and shared by the four social organizations on their Facebook pages, this section will be dedicated to discuss the results linking them back to the initial research questions and theoretical framework.

As a reminder, this thesis pursued to investigate the following research questions: How have the political claims of migrant squatters in the Right to Inhabit Movements and Baobab Experience in Rome been influenced by the Covid 19 socio-economic effects? To what extent do these two groups perceive the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity for a new cycle of protests and the achievement of their goals?

To answer these questions, it was necessary to identify the political claims made by the four social organizations taken under scrutiny and isolate the ones specifically formulated by migrants. This task was easier to accomplish for the Baobab Experience case, as all squatters are migrants, whilst for the other three cases the claims of the migrant members of these organizations had to be specifically addressed during the interviews. The analysis of the texts retrieved from the Facebook proved to be crucial, as it allowed me to have a clearer view on the events of the last months and on the consequent evolution of claims and demands expressed by Baobab Experience, Action, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani and ASIA USB.

As the aim of the thesis was to highlight the relationship between the Covid-19 socio-economic effects and migrant squatters' political claims, the first thing to do was to identify these effects. The most evident socio-economic effects outlined were the loss of jobs and income, the augmented risk of being evicted due to being unable to pay rent, the limitation of freedom of movement due to the closure of borders, the frustration of being homeless in a moment where institutions implement stay-home campaigns, and the impossibility to protest for all these problems.

Starting from Baobab Experience, it was observed that before the pandemic volunteers and inhabitants of Piazzale Spadolini deemed the right to hospitality, housing, freedom of movement and citizenship as the pillars of their struggles. These topics remained central during the pandemic, but the demands and actions connected to these claims changed accordingly to the extreme situation that emerged with the outbreak of the virus. Compared to the previous months, characterized by a more subtle critique to institutions, with an accent on Baobab Experience virtuous activities rather than on state's neglect, from the middle of March

onwards institutions have been targeted directly and held responsible for not addressing the upsetting situation experienced by the most vulnerable ones.

The topics of hospitality and housing were obviously treated as deeply interconnected, and if before the pandemic having a roof was seen as the first step to engage with the city and being independent, during the lockdown housing became a matter of survival and safety. Indeed, affirming the right to have an accommodation became more important, since the exclusionary character of the Italian reception system became more evident than ever during the lockdown. The neglect of the institutions and their inefficiency in finding acceptable solutions increased the frustration of migrants leading them to consider options they were not pondering before. In fact, the distressing conditions they experienced made them reconsider the possibility of squatting a building, since that moment always discarded due to the difficulty to squat and defend a place.

Since travelling was not allowed, the focus of migrants' and activists' struggles shifted from denouncing the EU discriminatory border regimes policies, to pressuring institutions to implement reception policies to guarantee protection and a decent life to newcomers. The closure of borders also affected the composition of the squat in Piazzale Spadolini, as more people arrived and got stuck in Rome, unable to continue their journey.

Regarding citizenship, the restrictive immigration laws introduced by Salvini were contested before, during and after the pandemic. However, since the need to access social services was higher during the pandemic, more emphasis has been paid to the need to regularise migrants, allowing them work legally and ensuring them access to the health system.

The Right to Inhabit Movements, as well as Baobab Experience, have modified their demands accordingly to the unprecedented situation of crisis, coherently with the claims and values that characterize the movement, namely the right to housing, need of welfare state and the right to health.

Before the outbreak of the virus, the movements were actively engaged in a struggle with the city to introduce a structured housing reform to solve once for all the housing problems in Rome. The claim for a systematic change was temporarily shelved during the pandemic, when the accent was put on the need to have serious state support to survive the crisis, as many lost their jobs or would not receive a full salary. The request of an emergency income and the suspension of rents and bills were the central topics regarding housing in that period, together with the necessity to stop evictions and foreclosure.

The privatization of services and health system has been deeply contested by the movements since their inception, as the city of Rome is characterized by areas with no access to public services and poorly connected to the rest of the city. In particular, the abolition of article 5 of the Renzi-Lupi represents a pressing need that the movements identify, since it hinders the right to health and education for many squatters, especially migrants. Moreover, the exclusionary effects of the emergency decrees implemented during the pandemic were harshly critiqued, as accessing the state financial help was only possible when certain criteria were met,

like having a residency. Another aspect strongly criticised was the uneven distribution of financial support, mainly allocated to companies and large industries to the detriment of workers.

Furthermore, what changed over time was the relationship between the RTIM and institutions. At the beginning of the year the movements tended to negotiate with the State, for instance asking to be included in the institutional discussion on housing reform. In that period, contentious actions were implemented mostly to pressure institutions. During the lockdown, the contestations and protests seemed to be driven by desperation and material needs, since the solutions adopted by the government in that moment were deemed not to be enough. This led to a more antagonistic relationship with institutions, and the RTIM threatened to take the streets and disobey the no-demonstration ban several times. Eventually, Blocchi Precari Metropolitani decided to break the restrictions and organized a sit-in in front of the city hall claiming for the never-arrived grocery vouchers promised by the government, and other drastic measures to help people facing severe economic situations.

All in all, the general claims of the groups analysed did not change with the emergence of the virus. What did change were the specific demands and strategies adopted, yet always rooted in the claim for housing, health, citizenship, freedom of movement and hospitality. Indeed, both for Baobab Experience and the Right to Inhabit Movements, a tendency to shift from structural demands to more emergency-driven and radical requests was observed.

One hypothesis of this research was that the contradictions emerging from this moment and the economic distress caused by the crisis would trigger a new cycle of struggles in Rome. Most of the migrants, activists and squatters surveyed, see this moment as a crucial one, as they believe that the uneven effects of this crisis, added to the previous conditions of economic disparity, will be unbearable for an increasing segment of society. From the analysis, it emerged that the potentiality of this moment relies on the consistency of the struggles on the above mentioned topics, as well as on a collective awareness of the link between the material problems faced by many and the economic system that created the preconditions for their existence. In sum, a need to have a wider network of solidarity that includes people who were not engaging with politics before is deemed to be essential.

The four groups examined are determined to raise the level of awareness on the above-discussed topics, organizing public contestations fuelled by the generalized social distress caused by the Covid-19 crisis. Even if the number of demonstrations increased over the last months (after the lifting of restrictions) it is way too soon to speak of a new cycle of struggle in Rome as Tarrow defined it. However, both Baobab Experience's and the Right to Inhabit Movements' squatters and activists foresee a new season of struggles that, according to them, will start after the summer. Nevertheless, Coronavirus Capitalism, as Klein (2020) defined it, and its policies have already been contested by the organization observed. Indeed, the economic measures implemented by the government to sustain the most vulnerable fringes of society were not taken without criticisms, as they were mostly guided by the necessity to avoid the collapse of a whole system,

rather than protecting individuals: "if everyone were to be evicted, if no one could pay their mortgage, and in the unhoused were allowed to legally occupy vacant property, what would authorities, the state, and global capital do?" (The RHJ Editorial Collective , 2020, p. 12). The ambiguity and limitations of these measures, as previously outlined, have not gone unnoticed. On the contrary, the emergency measures adopted during the pandemic have always been contextualized by the movements within the wider set of still-existing norms and laws which deeply discriminate against migrant squatters and the most vulnerable ones. Examples of these laws are the Renzi-Lupi Decree and its article 5, and the Salvini Security decrees. In general, what was observed is that Instead of proposing solutions for migrants, the Italian government have criminalized squatters and people sleeping in the streets as they were not respecting the quarantine policies implemented by the State. In this way, reception becomes a practice of bordering, as it produces immobile subjects stuck in a place they did not choose with very limited freedom of movement (Borri, 2017 as cited in Montagna & Grazioli, 2019). As the Editorial Collective of the Radical Housing Journal have pointed out "[i]nstead of offering promised protections, we thus are witness to new forms of racialized punishment being introduced for those most vulnerable to epidemics" (The RHJ Editorial Collective , 2020, p. 15). The hypocrisies and unfairness of these policies have accompanied the lives of people who, for one reason or another, are homeless and could not respect the "Stay Home!" imperative because they do not have one. The solutions adopted did not hint at the structural problems that have led to those situations but were rather aiming at containing the catastrophic effects of the epidemic. If housing, welfare services and immigration laws will not be addressed with a structural approach but only through emergency politics, the injustice that characterizes them will inevitably be renewed.

The migrant squatters' *political pragmatism* I referred to in the literature review section, was observed also in the empirical research. Being individuals with limited rights, the act of squatting a building or a public space becomes a way to affirm the right to have rights (Butler, 2011), making themselves visible in a context that tends to consider them inexistent. Indeed, by re-appropriating a space, they perform what has been defined as an act of citizenship (Isin, 2008), engaging with the city on different levels. This is the case of Piazzale Spadolini, where migrants embody the failure of the reception system and show it to the rest of the city by struggling for their right of hospitality with the mediation of volunteers and activists. The same holds true for migrant squatters in the Right to Inhabit Movements, as they represent a fundamental group taking part in the decision-making processes and in the organized struggles.

5.2 Concluding Thoughts and Final Remarks

This research demonstrated that the recent Covid-19 crisis and related measures exacerbated pre-existing problems, worsening the socio-economic conditions of many and replicating the injustices and discriminations faced by migrant squatters. These injustices were denounced and opposed by the groups analysed through the articulation of demands addressed at solving the pressing problems caused by the

pandemic, without losing sight of the wider picture and the root causes of those problems. In this sense, both Baobab Experience and the Right to Inhabit Movements proved to be two important political actors in Rome, embodying a central role in pressuring institutions, critiquing their work and offering alternatives to the existing policies of exclusion. The antagonism with the institutions was especially evident during the lockdown, when the deficiencies of the state were at the same time filled with activities of solidarity and mutualism and denounced through alternative forms of mobilization and contention. These groups, starting from demanding solutions to guarantee basic human rights, like the one to housing, health and hospitality, eventually turned into a political critique to the ruling class and its implementation of neoliberal policies.

This research also showed that the moment of disruption triggered by the pandemic is seen as an opportunity to show the contradictions of neoliberalism. Thus, the political activism and mobilizations of the next months are deemed to be essential to foster a favourable change for migrant squatters and more in general for the urban outcasts abandoned by a state that prioritize privatization and free market over welfare.

Finally, the pandemic did not only affect the condition of migrant squatters but also the possibilities of this study and the agency of the researcher. For these reasons, further investigations on this topic should start from compensating the data collected with an on-site analysis of the situation in Rome, employing methods allowing a physical proximity and a close observation of the phenomena described in the interviews and in the texts analysed. Moreover, since we are still at the early stage of this pandemic, and its effect can only be partially seen, a longitudinal study over the next years would be focal in monitoring the changes in political claim-making and demands of migrant squatters in response to the evolution of the crisis.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of Figures

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Appendix 2: Interview Grid

1st Theme: Personal Information

- Age
- Since when the interviewee is part of the collective/association
- What is hi/her role within the collective/association

2nd Theme: Organization/management of occupied places

- When and how the association is born?
- How many buildings /places are coordinated by the collective - how do you choose the location?
- How many people are involved in the movements?
- Composition of squatters
- What is the role of the collective within the squats?
    - Internal organization
    - Type of buildings (former factories, public property, uninhabited buildings)
    - Level of occupant autonomy
    - Level of participation required of occupants

3rd Theme: The Collective and the RTIM

- **If the group is part of the movements for the Right to inhabit Movements**
    - Role of the collective within the Right to Inhabit Movements
    - How exactly are the movements organized?
    - How decisions are made within the movements - degree of autonomy-collaboration between different collectives
    - How does the association position itself in relation to Right to Inhabit?
- **If the group is not part of the movements for the Right to inhabit Movements**
    - Do you happen to take part in demonstrations and protests together with RTIM?
    - On which points do you think you agree with them? On which, in case there are any, do you think you diverge?

4th Theme: Reasons of Squatters

- What is the most common reason that has led squatters to occupy a building? Do you identify several reasons? In relation to what?

- Once you joined the movement/association, do you believe that motivation or awareness about certain issues changed? In what way? Through what processes?

- Were migrants politically active in their respective countries?

- What kind of rights do they claim in particular?
    - Claiming right to housing
    - Claiming right to the city
    - Claiming right to hospitality
    - Claiming right to health
    - others

5th Theme: Role of migrants in occupations

- When do you think migrants started to interact with squatting and housing right movements in Rome?

- What claims have they brought with them? How has the collective, and the movements, changed after the increase in participation of migrants?

- With respect to the previous themes, right to housing, right to the city, right to citizenship, how are migrants positioned? Are there some themes that are more important to them?

6th Theme: The effects of Covid-19

- In general, what were the effects that this pandemic situation had on the collective and the movements in regard to…
    - Manifestation
    - New struggles
    - More/less attention to certain themes
    - More / less participation of certain vulnerable groups?
    - Politicization of groups that were not politicized
- From a social point of view
    - Quarantine not the same for all, effects on squatters
    - Unsecured fundamental rights (Palazzo Selam case)
    - Effects of this situation?
- From an economic point of view
    - Shopping vouchers not arrived
    - Exclusion of invisible groups

o   Abandonment of illegal workers

o   Effects of this situation?

7th Theme: Manifestations and participation of migrants

- Central Claims and demands leading the protests and demonstrations
- Which points regarding migrants (refugees and asylum seekers)
- Participation of migrants in events

8th Theme: Opportunity and New Cycles of Struggles

- Do you think that the current moment, characterized by a socio-economic crisis but also by great mobilizations (George Floyd and Black Lives Matter, Sit in and demonstrations for the right to work and housing in many Italian cities) represents an opportunity to achieve results and to carry on with more success certain battles / claims?
- Given the moment and the effects of the virus, do you notice a more widespread participation of citizens in the struggle on the issues you carry on? If so, which groups do you think are mobilizing more?
- What do you think will be the role of migrants and their claims in the movements for the right to live in Rome?

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