Racializing the concept of 'housing otherness': The effects of temporary housing policies on squatters in Rome

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Racializing the concept of 'housing otherness': The effects of temporary housing policies on squatters in Rome

Chiara Cacciotti

Polytechnic University of Turin, Italy

Chiara Cacciotti is an Anthropologist and Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Polytechnic University of Turin (DIST) as part of the research team working on the ERC project "Inhabiting Radical Housing". Her research interests include housing precarity, squatting, cosmopolitan enclaves and urban liminalities. **Contact: chiara.cacciotti@polito.it**

Abstract

This paper explores the long-standing relationship in Rome between socio-cultural diversity and the temporary nature of low-income housing solutions. I argue that that this phenomenon began long before recent neoliberal trends and the global post-2008 crisis, and instead emerged from the gradual development of a moral and racialized understanding of housing as a 'social award'. This has created a specific social category known as 'housing otherness', which includes migrants and Italian squatters who are experiencing severe housing distress. This exclusionary approach towards the most 'diverse' sections of the population in Rome can be traced back to the inception of public housing in Italy during the 1920s. The paper aims to provide a historical account of this process and demonstrate how it is based on the limited availability of residency and settling as a commodity. I also introduce the grassroots Roman housing rights movements and highlights their efforts to challenge the notion that residency and settling should be seen as something that is earned or deserved rather than as basic human rights.

Introduction

In Rome, Italy, there is a long-standing relationship between people who are considered culturally and socially different (such as migrants and squatters) and the temporary, low-income housing solutions they are provided. The way that housing is structured around the idea of proprietorship has a racial bias (Gibbons, 2018; Roy, 2017; Kotef, 2020) that has affected the history of public housing in Rome. Specifically, it has caused housing and social

policies to shift their focus towards the productive middle class (Salsano, 2008; Tosi, 2009; Vereni, 2015a). As a result, there has been a gradual development of a moral and racialized concept of public and private housing as a 'social award', which has excluded certain allegedly diverse sections of residents in Rome. Although the global trend of neoliberalism and the post-2008 economic crisis have exacerbated some of the issues around housing exclusion and affordability, this process had already begun in Rome because of the local racial bias and understanding of housing as something that is deserved.

The act of dividing, isolating and separating the 'other'—to use Durkheim's terms—has led to a distinction between those who are included and those who are excluded from social and housing opportunities (Düvell, 2011, p. 79). This, coupled with the increasing financialization of housing, has resulted in the marginalization of groups such as evicted/houseless Italians and migrants, who are often viewed as outcasts from the social and housing system. As a result, local institutions tend to offer last-minute housing solutions.[1] In the name of a symbolic 'irregularity', temporary and low-quality housing solutions are often provided, which has resulted in differentiated treatment and the lack of recognition of the right to access a home without the involvement of the market. This has been an ongoing issue that has affected the Roman public housing system since its inception in the 1920s, as I will explain in the following paragraphs.

This paper aims to provide a historical overview of the housing emergency in Rome, which is the chronic shortage of affordable housing. This issue has its roots in a widespread belief that housing is a limited resource, resulting in significant consequences for the most vulnerable groups, such as migrants and Italian squatters. Specifically, I explore the gradual development in Rome of a cultural and moral understanding of housing as a 'social award', which has influenced the history of public housing policies by prioritizing the so-called productive middle class. Consequently, a particular group of people has been excluded, and this has led to what I call 'housing otherness'.

To illustrate these ideas, I will begin by briefly discussing the history of housing policies for low-income groups in Southern Europe and Italy, before focusing on the situation in Rome. Here I demonstrate that the tendency to provide temporary and inadequate housing solutions to marginalized groups in Rome has been in place since the 1920s, well before the neoliberal trend of recent decades. This approach will serve as a foundation for the final sections of this paper, which will examine the genesis of the Roman housing rights movement. This movement is often associated with the practice of occupying buildings, which emerged as a political response to the dominant exclusionary and racialized system. The movement continues to offer a tangible solution to the issue of housing otherness while denouncing the persistently temporary and last-minute policies that target marginalized groups.

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[1] One recent example can be traced to the local 'slow eviction' practice. In September 2022, many former Roman squatters who inhabited *Viale delle Province* squat were accommodated in public housing. Although it may seem like a success, they were displaced to several peripheral districts of the city.

Housing as a 'social award': The historical background of Southern Europe

Many scholars argue that the expansion of housing distress in much of Southern Europe is the result of the rise and strengthening of neoliberal policies (Madden & Marcuse, 2016; Lees et al., 2016; Rolnik, 2019), leading to ongoing debates about the housing crisis and the retrenchment of the welfare state under neoliberalism. As noted by Thomas Hylland Eriksen (2016), neoliberalism's discursive power has become globally naturalized and hegemonic in recent decades. In this context, housing has increasingly become subject to the law of supply and demand and has been privatized both in the sense that it is reduced to the private space of the monogamous nucleus and is transacted more as a commodity than a right. This trend is apparent even in Southern European welfare regimes.

The state's retreat from direct involvement, the decentralization of responsibilities, the privatization of social housing, and the deregulation of the housing market (Tosi, 2008) are among the outcomes of a process that has failed to meet the demand for housing transformations in Italy. This failure is a result of new phenomena such as impoverishment, the disintegration of family units, and the rise of social vulnerability in previously protected sectors like the petty bourgeoisie (Vereni, 2015b). As a result, the increasing complexity of the social demand for housing has led to 'new' applicants, including the impoverished middle class, as well as old and new figures of housing marginality, who struggle to find lasting solutions.

Antonio Tosi argues that many Southern European housing regimes, including Italy's, have been marked by 'significant social constraints', regardless of the welfare policies adopted (Tosi, 2009, p. 38-39). This is due to a long-standing tradition of portraying housing demand as an undifferentiated and 'extensive' social body, which has not ensured the right to housing for all but instead has generated systematic preferences and exclusions. These policies have mainly benefited the intermediate social strata, with 'workers' being the privileged recipients of public housing.

In Mediterranean welfare regimes, there has been a consistent trend in public housing history towards excluding the most disadvantaged populations from the benefits of adequate housing through deliberate differential treatment, rather than by accident (Tosi, 2008, p. 39). This tendency is commonly known as 'skimming', whereby housing policies initially designed for the homeless population end up catering to the more advantaged (Wodon, 1992, p. 94). This has been particularly evident in Italy, Spain and Portugal, where, instead of strengthening the social rental sector, governments have opted for alternative solutions, such as cash benefits for the male breadwinner of the family unit, perceived as the 'productive' element.

Countries such as Italy, Spain and Portugal have historically not considered extended access to housing due to their particular family unit structure, which often has a substitute role for state welfare support (Allen et al., 2004). As a result, public housing has not primarily served the poorest or neediest individuals, but rather 'workers' who belong to a monogamous nucleus and those who could be expected to achieve some form of economic stability in the medium to long term, thereby escaping the circuit of social policies. For others, the only

available path is through 'extraordinary' structures such as dormitories, reception centres, institutes, camps, and the like, as in the case of Italy (Clough Marinaro, 2009; Vereni & Casentini, 2020; Dotsey & Lumely-Sapanski, 2021).

When the public became private: Post-war Italy

In Italy, the challenge of creating a comprehensive housing policy rather than a mere building policy has persisted for over a century, spanning from the reformism era of the post-Second World War period to the present day. According to Tosi, the focus of housing policies has been primarily on improving access to homeownership for disadvantaged populations, rather than on promoting coherence between the availability of housing and the specific needs of the inhabitant. Tosi attributes this emphasis to the phenomenon of the 'urbanization of the housing issue' (2008, p. 44), which refers to the absorption of the housing issue into urban policies and the resulting neglect of its socioeconomic components. As a consequence, housing policy in Italy has become excessively concentrated on aspects related to building, such as national programs for the redevelopment and regeneration of peripheral districts, while socioeconomic considerations have been pushed to the background.

In Italy, housing has long been a crucial indicator of citizenship rights, with emergency solutions for marginalized populations often resulting in not just socio-institutional marginalization, but also cultural and moral marginalization. The legitimacy and social consensus surrounding these measures have been called into question by constitutionalists, who argue that the Italian Republic has been plagued by chronic provisional structures since the time of the Constituent Assembly in 1946. This has led to a continuous portrayal of national political life as exceptional, anomalous, and frequently emergency-driven (Guzzetta, 2018). On the housing policy front, many scholars, such as Giancarlo Storto (2018), have noted that the history of post-war Italy is marked by the gradual disappearance of housing policies aimed at supporting the most vulnerable sections of society from the national political agenda.

The diminishing political and institutional attention towards providing housing for the most vulnerable has been a persistent backdrop throughout Italy's history, even after the war. This led to a second phase where public involvement in housing provision was reduced, giving way to private individuals and the urban rental market, as noted by Storto (2018). An overarching approach to urban planning was identified as a recurring theme, particularly in major cities that have been historically impacted by unprecedented internal—and since the 1990s external—migration.

City governments were reportedly ill-equipped to deal with the wave of migration that occurred in the post-Second World War period, leading them to rely heavily on market forces to address housing demand. However, this approach led to a confluence of profit and income that drove up sales values and rents, thereby making it increasingly difficult for families to find affordable housing options that aligned with their financial means (2018: 13). As a result, even lower-income households have resorted to purchasing homes, which has negatively

impacted their overall quality of life due to 'self-punitive forms of savings to the detriment of other consumption that would have allowed a better life quality' (ibid., p. 32). This phenomenon dispels the notion that property ownership necessarily equates to socioeconomic prosperity.

On the public policy front, the peak of this process was reached with the victory of the Christian Democrat party in the post-Second World War period and the establishment of the national INA-Casa plan, as set out in the Fanfani Law, which produced 'subtle but persistent social differences associated with the different forms of housing' (Vereni, 2015a, p. 134). The draft law, titled 'Measures to increase workers' employment, facilitating the construction of houses for workers', was the subject of a heated parliamentary debate, but was eventually passed on 28 February 1949 during the Christian Democrat government of Alcide De Gasperi. Its main objective was to combat unemployment by constructing flats specifically 'for workers' (Beguinot, 2002, p. 169), using funds from the European Reconstruction Program as well as from percentage deductions from workers' and employers' wages.

In the aftermath of World War II, the reconstruction of the nation was of utmost importance, and public housing played a crucial role both socially and politically. The INA-Casa national plan, which has been lauded as a model in several instances, was inspired by Keynesian economics and grounded in Christian Democratic ideals of solidarity, seeking to win over the support of the petty-bourgeois class (Casula, 2002, p. 16). Deputy Amintore Fanfani argued that the Plan would generate a virtuous cycle of demand for goods and materials, leading to increased investment. In addition, housing was seen as the cornerstone of family stability, which, from the perspective of the Christian Democrats, was the foundation of society and the state. For this reason, the Plan included a moral dimension that recognized the importance of decent living conditions for the most vulnerable segments of society.

The INA-Casa Plan, which constructed flats and neighbourhoods, played a significant role in creating what is now known as the 'public city' (Di Biagi, 2001). However, according to Italo Insolera, 'if we add up the work done by all state bodies, the Municipality and cooperatives, we do not reach a very high percentage of all the houses built: private initiative continued to prevail even after the Second World War" (1962, p. 204). This is evident in the fact that about one-third of the city was built outside the regulatory plan, often on non-buildable land by small builders who would later benefit from amnesties and sanatoriums (Cellamare, 2010; 2013). In the 1960s, self-constructed areas were home to approximately one million people (Ferrarotti, 1970), and today, over a third of Rome's population resides in such areas (Portelli, 2017, p. 160).

An influential precedent: the liberal era and Fascism in Rome

The moral configuration endorsing the reward scheme in Rome has institutional legitimacy that dates back to an era much older than the post-Second World War period or the recent welfare crisis, as stated by historian Fernando Salsano (2008). According to

Salsano, even during the liberal age (1910s-1920s), from the beginning of public housing to the establishment of official suburbs (*borgate ufficiali*), the policy of identifying tenants in Rome has always been guided by a process of social selection based on possession of 'moral and political' requirements and explicit protection of the middle classes (*ibid.*, p. 105-106). The social and moral division principle linked to housing existed before and during Fascism, well before the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s. Salsano notes that the public housing reform implemented in 1919 already formally (and socially) sanctioned at least two different categories of public housing in Rome, splitting from the previous unique definition:

> 'Low-income' council flats, consisting of a maximum of three rooms, with reduced services and poor finishings, and the 'economical' apartments, with a width of up to six rooms, with better services and high-quality finishings, intended for the middle-class. Another type of construction experiment in Rome was 'rapid' flats, called this way because they were built with great speed and simplicity of means (Salsano, 2008: 101-102).

In the early stages of addressing the housing emergency, the focus was on achieving speedy and cost-effective construction to provide shelter for shantytown residents and those who had been evicted while waiting for more public housing to become available. However, this phase was followed by the serial production of substandard housing, including the 'very fast' flats (*case rapidissime*), which were an even poorer version of the rapid flats that had been established and institutionalized during the Fascist era when the link between social assistance and population control had reached its peak. It appears that this trend can be traced back to the birth of public housing in Italy, specifically to the Luzzatti Law of 31 May 1903 (Salsano, 2008).

Salsano argues that the main aim of the Luzzatti Law was to create a social policy that could 'stimulate, through the establishment of new public bodies, the intervention of the State for the benefit of popular classes, in response to the requests for greater distributive justice coming from workers' organizations' (2008, p. 96). However, what the Law is most remembered for is the assignment of the task of constructing public housing to municipalities through the establishment of institutions legally similar to municipal companies. The first such institution, established in 1903, was the ICP (*Istituto Case Popolari*), which aimed to meet the demand for housing from all social groups who were excluded from the private market.

In the years that followed, particularly up to the onset of the First World War, public housing gained momentum, particularly in Rome where districts such as San Saba and Testaccio were built in the southern quadrant. Nonetheless, despite the initial intentions, the flats were increasingly allocated to middle-class employees or working-class families with a steady income, albeit meagre but adequate to cover the rent costs. Those who were unable to secure accommodation through subletting or cohabitation resorted to makeshift housing or self-built shacks, which gradually were consolidated into more permanent housing units in their own right.

Subsequently, these informal settlements developed into spontaneous agglomerations of precarious housing, commonly known as *borghetti*, which became a major concern for all subsequent administrations in the government of the Italian capital. Furthermore, as early as 1908, the *assessore all'Igiene* (literally translated as the councillor for Hygiene) proposed the construction of temporary houses to house the inhabitants of these precarious settlements. However, instead of being a short-term solution, institutional efforts to address the housing needs of the poorest classes were often prolonged beyond what was expected. In contrast to institutions that catered to the housing needs of the middle classes by constructing and assigning rental properties, the Municipality was responsible for meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged social groups by implementing welfare programs and temporary solutions.

However, the budget results of the first seven years of municipal management could have been better. In 1919, the ICP took over the so-called official barracks with the intention of 'restoring discipline in the payment' of pensions and improving urbanization services such as lighting, water, and sewage. At this point, the pedagogical purpose of Roman institutions began to emerge more clearly, as noted by Salsano. The agreement between the Municipality and the ICP stated that:

> the Institute would replace the municipal houses with hygienic, permanent public housing to be built in different locations within ten years. The new dwellings should have been assigned to 'deserving' tenants under the maximum favourable conditions allowed by the general rules that regulated the Institute, which, in its official publications, nevertheless reiterated that it is not "charity" (*ibid*., p. 101).

According to Salsano, the ICP was entrusted with the responsibility of removing the most 'irreducible and undesirable' residents from public housing and subjecting the structures to a 'special, rigid disciplinary and administrative regime.' The aim was to carry out a 'strict, rigid selection of the healthiest part of the tenancy itself and, with its re-education to the necessary social discipline, preparing and facilitating the execution of the housing demolition program and the consequent sorting of the families living there.' (*ibid*.).

During the Fascist regime, the Institute's political function continued to explicitly protect the middle classes and engage in social selection of the population. Historian Luciano Villani noted that the initial Fascist-built suburbs in Rome were primarily intended for 'immigrants and evicted' and faced issues of poor building quality (2012, p. 14). Contrary to the 'myth of foundation' that suggests all evictees were relocated to the official *borgate*, in reality, this group was far from homogeneous in terms of social stratification. Many found new accommodation in the private market, with the most central and valuable 'economic flats' being assigned to the middle class and regular 'popular flats' being assigned to working families with a stable income.

According to Villani, all of these families contributed to the increase in population in the suburbs. On the other hand, the poorest quality housing stock was mostly occupied by immigrants and unemployed people, many of whom lived in makeshift shacks or collective shelters established between the 1920s and 1930s (*ibid*., p. 17). The evictees were required to

demonstrate that they had a stable occupation, a lease agreement, regular payment of rent, a clean criminal record, and above all, a 'correct' civil registration. For those who did not meet these criteria and were unable to access public housing, temporary shelters or villages were the only options available, opening the doors for the irregulars who were excluded from the formation of the fascist 'new man.'

Thus, the division of social and symbolic classes in Rome is evident in the genesis of public housing system, leading to a 'spatialized class consciousness' (Vereni, 2015a) that has perpetuated the housing crisis for marginalized groups. This reveals the historical and moral connection between social marginalization and temporary housing, indicating that Fascism was not an isolated event but rather a part of the larger process that treated housing as a commodity subject to a reward regime, benefiting the more privileged groups at the expense of the disadvantaged ones.

The cultural legitimization of 'housing otherness' in Rome

Alongside institutional developments, Roman society has gradually come to accept and embrace the urban rental economy, according to Di Salvo and Pizzo (2015). This perspective has led to the creation of what I call 'housing otherness', a moral and semantic container that includes those who are excluded from obtaining medium or long-term housing, as they are deemed unworthy of accessing domestic space and the primary and secondary services necessary for a decent life. These individuals are often unable to access public or social housing, or the real estate market, due to their perceived limited productivity or sociocultural diversity. The inability to access suitable housing with necessary services and rights has resulted in the chronic precariousness of these people's housing situations over time.

Their socioeconomic and cultural differences have contributed to their exclusion, and the treatment they receive is often based on temporary and differential measures. Despite some differences, one constant among those considered 'other' in the past and present is the discriminatory treatment they face. This lack of recognition for their sedentary lifestyle in Rome leads to targeted institutional interventions that focus on the most 'different' segments of the population. In the past, this mainly involved shanty-town dwellers, who were often unsurprisingly immigrants from southern Italy. Today, the interventions are also aimed at non-European migrants or Italian squatters who are experiencing socioeconomic difficulties.

The term 'housing otherness' proposed here encompasses individuals who are unable to afford a private residence and those who fail to meet the public housing eligibility requirements due to their diverse socioeconomic and cultural background. It is noteworthy that the institutional process of racialization affects not only migrants but also Italians who face severe housing and economic instability. This process systematically links the housing crisis and squatting to an otherness that is frequently culturalized, criminalized, and at times racialized (Vereni, 2015a).

From this perspective, residency is an advantageous vantage point and an essential measure of citizenship rights. The continued implementation of this racialized approach can

be seen in the recurring denial of the right to reside in the past and the present for those considered as the 'housing otherness'. Migrants from Southern Italy who once inhabited the shanties in the capital had to contend with the Fascist laws against urbanization (No. 358/1931) and the regulations on internal migration (No. 1092/1939), both of which were annulled with Law No. 5 of 1961 after a rigorous political struggle. Meanwhile, the current squatters, whether Italians or migrants, are among the primary beneficiaries of the so-called Lupi Decree (No. 47/2014), which was later converted into Law No. 80/2014.

According to the Lupi Decree, which is still in effect, squatters are barred from applying for public housing for at least five years (art. 5 comma 1-bis). Additionally, this decree deprives squatters of the right to apply for residency, thereby making it more difficult for them to access crucial social services like healthcare and utilities.

The discursive construction aiming to cause the 'social death' (Grohman, 2017, p. 124) of squatters involves stripping them of their previous identity and relegating them to a symbolic position where they are no longer considered moral agents but rather, completely subject to state disciplinary regimes. This social death creates a moral and social status known as 'outsiderhood,' a term coined by Grohman, which combines the spatial dimension of the foreign invasion of public and private territory with the temporal aspect of transience, even when seeking to establish a permanent settlement by occupying a place. Although primarily applicable to migrants, in Rome, the concept of 'housing otherness' (or outsiderhood) encompasses anyone deemed 'different' from the norm in terms of housing, regardless of citizenship.

One of the most significant recent examples of applying the concept of 'outsiderhood' to the Italian context is the exclusion from residency for the current housing otherness. This exclusion was established through the decree-law no. 47 of 28 March 2014 (later converted into Law no. 80 of 23 May 2014), which was part of the National Housing Plan of Matteo Renzi's left-wing government and is commonly referred to as the Lupi Decree. Article 5 of this decree, titled 'Fighting the abusive occupation of properties,' states that 'anyone who illegally occupies an untitled property cannot request residency or access public services related to the property, and any documents issued in violation of this prohibition are null and void.'

Many illegal squats in Rome are associated with organized crime, unlike those associated with the housing rights movement. However, the Lupi Decree makes no distinction between the two. Regardless of the legitimacy of their claims or their years of waiting for public housing, anyone who occupies a property illegally cannot request or renew residency in the building, and consequently, cannot access the rights associated with it, including healthcare and education. The strategic purpose of maintaining such precariousness is evident, as is the underlying social and cultural consensus. This selection of the population into 'deserving' and 'undeserving' of housing is supported by a political dimension that justifies these initiatives.

However, the process of systematically excluding the housing otherness from residency has not occurred without resistance. The repeal of Fascist laws in 1961 and the current

protests against the Lupi Decree are both results of recognizing that the housing issue, which is often viewed as an administrative problem in contemporary Rome and Italy, is in fact a politically charged battle. This battle was initially adopted by the parliamentary left wing and later by the extra-parliamentary left wing, contributing to the creation of a 'counter-history of the right to housing and the system of squatting for housing purposes aimed at making it a para-revolutionary struggle and class identification' (Vereni, 2015a: 135). The individuals involved in this battle, who later organized themselves into housing rights movements, have positioned themselves as spokespeople for the housing otherness that has been excluded from the rewarding public and private housing regimes.

The genesis of Roman housing rights movements

Social movements that are associated with housing squats, both past and present, have taken on the task of representing the housing otherness politically and claiming their right to settle outside the neoliberal housing logic. They aim to go beyond 'the urgency, the need, and even the right to housing, and to expand easily in the right to the city... a broader sense of social possession of space that legitimizes the "house" as, in fact, a portion of the right to the city' (Vereni, 2013, p. 317). The moral and cultural connotation of 'others' associated with the housing otherness has remained almost unchanged since the post-war period. However, while previously the protagonists were mainly shanty-town dwellers and immigrants from the South of Italy, today it comprises an impoverished Italian middle class (mainly composed of single and divorced individuals, the most disadvantaged by the current rankings of public housing) and low-income foreign migrants. Although the condition of socioeconomic alterity remains, the origins and the historical-political phenomena connected to it have changed. The presence of migrants represents both a constant and a novelty; a constant insofar as it embodies an otherness that once belonged to others and which has now expanded in scale, and a novelty since current housing rights movements have taken on the responsibility of including non-native people within an all-inclusive concept of residency and rights to housing.

Housing rights movements in Rome have consistently challenged the notion that there is a limited supply of public and private housing, arguing instead that institutional practices prioritize certain groups as 'deserving' of residency and settlement. Their history, dating back to the post-World War II period, has been characterized by a growing awareness of the abundance of empty and unused spaces in the city, which has now evolved into a fight for socially just urban regeneration. By condemning wasteful construction and the commodification of urban space through abandonment, housing rights movements seek to redistribute abandoned public and private spaces to those in need of housing - particularly those who are part of housing otherness. However, this political struggle is often criminalized by public authorities and institutions due to the formal illegality of their occupation practices.

Before delving into the analysis of the current political scenario, Pierpaolo Mudu (2014) identifies three historical phases that have led to the current configuration of housing struggles in Rome that serve as useful organizing frames. During the first phase (1950s-

1960s), the Italian Communist Party (PCI) and popular consultations (*consulte popolari*) were the primary political actors fighting for the integration of all suburbs into the rest of the city and the repeal of Fascist laws against urbanism and internal migration (abolished in 1961). The *consulte popolari* were crucial in promoting local struggles, such as the construction of roads, sewers, canteens, emergency services, and childcare centres, before expanding to include housing issues. The Roman *consulte popolari* differed from those of other Italian cities by having a closer connection to the urban and social characteristics of Rome. From their inception in 1948, the struggles gradually shifted from addressing immediate discomfort to fighting for all services. As a result, housing struggles in that period arose due to the failures of urban and housing policies.

However, the lack of policies is not the only factor at play here. An exclusively causal explanation would overlook other equally structural and defining aspects of the phenomenon. According to some authors of the time (Marcelloni, 1974; Tozzetti, 1989), there are various reasons why this discourse has taken root more in Rome than in other Italian cities. One of these is the symbolic role of the slum dweller (before) and the tenant (after) within the political discourses of the housing struggle in Rome. These figures often replaced the more traditional figure of the worker linked to leftist class struggle. Tozzetti notes that 'in labour struggles, the worker faced with the strike, while the tenant self-reduces his rent' (1989, p. 197). A benefit of this practice was that 'as the months passed, the self-reducers had more money, unlike the worker who pays the strike with a cut on the paycheck' (*ibid.*, p. 200).

In Rome, the struggles for both housing and class are embodied in the figure of the slum dweller and later the tenant, as the city lacks a strong industrial presence. This was highlighted during the second phase of the struggle in the mid-1970s, where non-parliamentary political groups like *Lotta Continua* and national unions like the National Union of Assignee Tenants (UNIA) played a significant role. While UNIA occupied buildings to negotiate with institutions, *Lotta Continua* focused on private real estate and was linked to the political climate of that time. The speculative character of the INA-Casa policy also came to light during this period, where buildings were constructed in peripheral areas without necessary infrastructure, leading to a lack of basic services for families living in these settlements.

Housing unions like UNIA and SUNIA (founded in 1964 and 1972 respectively) shifted the focus to tenants rather than shanty-town dwellers, although the latter remained an important part of the struggle. This resulted in a series of laws and demonstrations, culminating in the enactment of Law no. 392 in 1978, which established rent control and a new public housing policy. However, this progress was tragically undone in 1998 when Law 392 was repealed, leading to the liberalization of the rental market.

Squatting becomes a permanent urban feature

The third and final phase of Mudu's tripartite model, which started in the second half of the 1980s through to 2014, marked the moment when squatting became a structural

phenomenon in the city and gave rise to the leading Roman housing rights movements. These include the Citizens' Committee for the Fight for Housing, founded in 1988; Action, created in 2002 from the Right to Housing movement that emerged in 1999; and the Precarious Metropolitan Blocks, which appeared in 2007.

Today, there are at least three significant changes compared to the past. The first is a spatial shift in the choice of the *locus occupandi*, which now corresponds to abandoned public or private buildings not initially intended for housing purposes and not necessarily located in the suburbs. In previous phases, squatters mainly occupied unassigned council flats. The second change corresponds to a mutation of the internal demography of these contexts, which now includes a significant number of migrants and people and families belonging to the so-called "impoverished middle classes," (Tosi, 2008, p. 38) both Italians and foreigners, who cannot afford to pay rent in Rome. The third is the formalization of a self-organized process for squats' internal cohabitation and external struggles aimed at urban regeneration of the entire abandoned property stock.

Furthermore, what is also significant is the current housing movements' discursive and political reaction to institutional labelling and treatment of housing otherness. While 'migrants' may be an interesting category of analysis for scholars or a politically alarming category for common sense, housing movements fold racial differences into socioeconomic determinants and partly counter local public policies. The Roman public housing regime pursued a differentiated and temporary treatment of those perceived as "diverse." In contrast, housing movements' internal and external discourse aims to diminish their racial realities in the name of common humanity divided into social classes (Vereni, 2015a, p. 131).

Over the past thirty years, the number of non-western European born members in Rome's squatting movements has steadily increased. This can be traced back to the second half of the 1980s when Rome experienced a new wave of international migration from North Africa, the Philippines, Poland, China, sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe (*ibid.*, p. 137). These migrants faced similar problems to those of Southern Italian immigrants in Rome after the post-war period. They were immediately placed at the bottom of the wage pyramid and had trouble finding affordable housing. Some groups organized themselves into networks of solidarity or exploitation, the latter referring to groups managed by criminal organizations, while others were incorporated into the racial segmentation of the labour market (Cristaldi, 2013). Those who could not connect to any network or job specialization had to deal with the double precariousness of employment and housing. Therefore, they initially organized themselves into their own self-managed housing occupations before moving into housing rights movements' cosmopolitan occupations.

The arrival of non-EU migrants within Roman squats marked the beginning of the third phase (mid-1980s-2014), which has its roots in the "hidden history" of self-built housing and the *borgate*, a debate between formal and informal that has characterized Roman urban planning (Portelli, 2017, p. 160). However, after 2014, the movements stopped occupying new spaces due to the impossibility of requesting or renewing residency. Therefore, over the last decade, they increasingly focused on fighting against wasteful construction (*spreco edilizio*)

and dispossession by abandonment, resulting in the commodification of urban space (Aureli & Mudu, 2017, p. 506).

The increasing number of abandoned buildings, mostly due to the securitization era of the 1990s (*cartolarizzazioni*)[2], has left many publicly-owned buildings in need of clear procedures for allocation and conversion for housing purposes. According to Aureli and Mudu, these empty buildings have been socially and mediatically represented as anything but a political problem, masking the decisions and responsibilities behind the process. This attitude depoliticizes the housing issue itself, reducing it to an 'emergency' and a mere supply shortage, ignoring the political implications of housing for low-income people. The depoliticization of housing as a public order problem has led to the depoliticization of people in housing emergencies, particularly those outside the status of productive workers. In contrast, squats have reclaimed parts of the city and challenged fundamental aspects of Western societies by exposing the state's failure to recognize the right to a whole slice of 'denationalized' citizenship. While the Lupi Decree forced squats to stop occupying new buildings, many have shifted their focus to strengthening their political presence in the city. They have done this by opening up their spaces and offering bottom-up welfare services to non-squatters, promoting urban regeneration that encompasses more than just housing, but also long-term urban habitability.

In recent years, housing rights movements have come together several times to pursue common political objectives. These movements aim to make housing a policy issue that serves the general interest, rather than a treatment that is racialized or culturalized, and to denounce temporary housing solutions for squatters. However, eviction without providing stable alternatives has become a tragic reality in Rome since the 1990s. The Municipality of Rome was expected to provide housing to families living in temporary housing assistance centres (CAAT) and those residing in 'public and private buildings improperly used as housing' (housing squats), in accordance with Regional Law n. 12/1999. Nevertheless, in recent years, each eviction has resulted in temporary and cheap housing solutions, which have forced many to return to squatting movements, as no other viable options exist. This institutional practice reached its peak with the Lupi Decree. However, before the decree's approval, all housing movements gathered once again for the Tsunami Tour, which was the last wave of housing occupations before the decree interrupted the practice. The Tsunami Tour comprised actions, marches, raids, and occupations, which took place from 2012 to 2013, and led to the occupation of ten new buildings, many of which still house hundreds of families. A few months later, the movements ceased to occupy new spaces, following the Italian National Housing Plan and Article 5 of the Lupi Decree. This was due to the inability

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[2] Securitization, or *cartolarizzazione*, is a financial technique used to convert complex assets, such as credits, into more easily tradable, market-based financial instruments, a key process in the financialization of housing. In Italy, securitization was initiated by Law 448/1998, also known as the 1999 Finance Act, and was later culminated by Decree-Law no. 351/2001 (later converted into Law no. 410) entitled "Urgent provisions on the privatization and enhancement of public real estate assets and the development of real estate mutual funds." This has resulted in a significant number of properties being sold to the private sector and left unoccupied. Over the years, many of these properties have been occupied by housing movements and repurposed for residential use.

to request or renew residency and the denial of access to public services within an occupied building, despite the widespread practice of fictitious residency (*residenza fittizia*[3]).

From this moment on, squats began to solidify their central political discourse towards the outside. From a social perspective, they claimed their experience as a successful model of coexistence between Italians and non-European immigrants. From a spatial point of view, they highlighted the perception of limited available spaces compared to the many empty and unused areas in the urban fabric. This led many to adopt and redefine the term 'urban regeneration' to define their struggle. Despite the approval of the Lupi Decree, the results of the Tsunami Tour were slow to materialize. In January 2014, the Lazio Region launched an Extraordinary Plan (No. 303/2014) to provide new accommodations to the city's crowded General Call, municipal residences, and housing squats. The plan aimed to secure funding and set a timetable for completion by 2019. However, none of the settlers benefited from the measures in question.

In 2016, the Extraordinary Commissioner Francesco Paolo Tronca signed Resolution No. 50 of the Municipality of Rome. This resolution aimed to assert the criteria of the General Call, which had been modified a few years earlier by the right-wing mayor Gianni Alemanno.[4] It also established a list of occupied buildings, including social and cultural centres, as well as organized and spontaneous housing squats, to be evicted relatively quickly. According to the resolution, the council flats already assigned by the city would be enough to solve the housing emergency once and for all. Furthermore, the quota of entitled occupants concerning the Region's Extraordinary Plan should be lowered to 15% provided they can demonstrate that they comply with residency, although the Lupi Decree formally prevents them from doing so. The evictions will, therefore, affect people living in almost all existing occupations, including those in a) dangerous properties with tangible risks to the occupant's safety b) those subject to preventive seizure measures, and c) those whose occupation entails tax damages.[5]

The movements continued their protests, including hunger strikes, but the resolution ultimately resulted in the violent eviction of the former Federconsorzi and Ispra headquarters in Via Curtatone, leading to clashes in Piazza Indipendenza on August 24, 2017. The police used fire hydrants against the mainly refugee and Eritrean asylum seeker squatters who had camped in the adjacent square, causing several injuries. This incident gained widespread media attention and support for police action, causing the movements to concentrate on

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[3] In 2017, the municipal council adopted Resolution No. 31, which established the 'System of Registration of Homeless People Habitually Present in the Territory of the Capital of Rome.' This system introduced the practice of fictitious residency, commonly referred to as 'Modesta Valenti' in honor of a homeless woman who died in 1983 near the Termini train station due to a lack of social assistance. This service is available at all local city halls and allows individuals to obtain documentation for self-registration through the Modesta Valenti system.

[4] Alemanno's changes were beneficial for large families, particularly those in so-called 'extreme' situations such as living on the street or in reception facilities with their entire family unit.

[5] The resolution included the 'first evacuation intervention plan' which covered 16 properties, all designated for residential use. Additionally, the annex listed other properties, including social and cultural centers, which would be considered later for a total of 74 properties.

defending existing occupations. The subsequent mayor of Rome, Virginia Raggi, continued the path set by the Tronca resolution.

In 2018, the movements again joined forces in opposition to the appointment of Lega party leader Matteo Salvini as Minister of the Interior and the issuance of his security decrees. While the decrees did not explicitly target housing squats, they focused on illegal immigration, public order and security, and included controversial measures such as the annulment of humanitarian protection and the residency permit for asylum seekers no longer being sufficient for registration and obtaining residency. These measures led to further unpleasant incidents in Rome, such as the police refusing to renew residency permits for political refugees who had registered their domicile via the Modesta Valenti fictitious residency.[6]

The migrants-squatters were also impacted by these measures, which, in combination with the Lupi Decree, left them unable to renew their residency (often including the fictitious residency mentioned earlier) and at risk of being unable to access services like general practitioners or enrolling their children in school. These decrees were influenced by the previous 'Contract for the government of change' signed by the Lega party and the 5-Star Movement during their 2018 coalition government. The document explicitly references housing squats, albeit vaguely, regarding the distinctions between occupations of council flats already assigned and those associated with housing movements:

Abusive occupations

Data on squatting indicates that there are approximately 48,000 illegally obtained housing units. There is no land registry of occupied dwellings. Many are public housing, and some are private, making it more challenging to get data through the census.

In the case of squatters, eviction procedures must be facilitated by taking firm and prompt action if certified necessity conditions are not met.

The assessment of the state of necessity is the responsibility of the Local Health Authority and the territorial Social Services agency, which must attest to the deficient psycho-physical conditions and the objective inability of the subject to provide the necessary support for himself and possibly for his family.

Conditions of economic hardship alone can never justify abusive occupations.

Illegal foreign squatters must be repatriated.

In 2019, the political climate led to several consequences, one of which was the creation of a list of 22 evictions (later increased to 25) by the Minister of the Interior. These evictions targeted both housing occupations and social centres in Rome. As a result, the housing rights movements and social centres began to meet weekly to discuss the situation and plan their response. In the following months, numerous marches and demonstrations were held,

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[6] Numerous local NGOs and associations, including Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati, A Buon Diritto Onlus, Baobab Experience, and Radicali Roma (bit.ly/3YXQ4Zn. Last access: March 17, 2023), have spoken out against this practice.

primarily protesting against the security decrees and the 'Salvini list'. Additionally, the first eviction included in the list, which targeted the Don Calabria elementary school in the Primavalle neighbourhood, occupied since 2003, was met with widespread opposition.

Conclusions: what lies behind and what comes next

In Rome, the ability to have a permanent home now requires the intermediation of the market, and this has had a cultural impact on the criteria for accessing public housing, leaving those who don't meet the requirements, or are part of 'housing otherness', with the option of 'conquering' space through squatting as a political process. This has led to people in need of housing finding themselves in a historically established system that is different from what it was before the arrival of foreign migrants. Nevertheless, the goal of these movements is to turn individual needs into a collective political project that not only addresses the material problem but also politicizes individuals by modelling and forging it from space, which is more than just a container. According to Carlotta Caciagli (2019), the Roman squatting system does not solely provide an immediate solution to the lack of housing nor is it solely political, but a combination of both in a configuration that seeks to foreshadow a sustainable cultural and political alternative to a racialized capitalist political-economic system, with roots that go beyond the 2008 crisis.

Despite their differences, Roman housing squats function more as 'total social facts' than as mere exceptions to the housing rule. As ongoing social and political practices, they challenge what Anders and Sedlmaier (2017, p. 8) refer to as 'regimes of provision', or cultural norms surrounding the production, distribution, and use of urban and residential spaces. Therefore, housing squats in Rome bring up the central issue of the relationship between spatial and legal order, and whether they are tolerated, legalized, legally challenged or violently uprooted, they always raise public discourses that transcend the spaces themselves and involve key concepts related to citizenship and property.

The Roman housing movements' practice of occupying new spaces has been disrupted by the Lupi Decree. As a result, they have had to redefine their struggle and develop new grassroots strategies to counteract its effects, particularly since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic (Grazioli, 2022). Their efforts led to a directive signed by Rome's current mayor, Roberto Gualtieri, in November 2022. The directive provides a waiver to Article 5 of the Lupi Decree and recognizes the right of squatters to ask for residency, but only if they fall into one of the four categories of vulnerable subjects deserving protection.

Moreover, over the course of several years, the Roman squatters have been discussing urban regeneration in a way that differs from the problematic top-down policies that have contributed to gentrification (Bridge et al., 2011). Rather than just defending their spaces, many squats are attempting to integrate with the surrounding area by inviting other people to join their cause and converting the squats into vibrant places that offer sociocultural services to everyone, not just squatters. This shift towards building a more equitable and sustainable model of urban living for all has become a central focus of the housing rights movements, which are facing a new turning point compared to the historical phases

described by Mudu and mentioned earlier. Each housing movement is now thinking—sometimes in unison, sometimes independently—about how the desired regeneration process is already visible in individual squats, and how it can be applied to other areas of the city as a model against the 'wasteful construction' (Aureli & Mudu, 2017, p. 506). The emerging consequences of this process correspond to a greater awareness of their social and political role for the entire city, rather than just for those experiencing housing distress. Some squatters are even developing proposals to regularize their situation and transform their precarious and illegal status into permanent council flats and community centres without displacement or eviction.

In recent years, many Roman squats have been talking about urban regeneration, not in the top-down sense of policies that contribute to gentrification, but in the sense of opening up their spaces to the surrounding community. Squats are transforming into places of life and sociocultural services that are available to everyone, not just squatters. The housing movements are now focusing on building and spreading a more equitable and sustainable model of inhabiting the city for all, rather than simply defending their own spaces. This represents a new turning point for housing rights movements compared to the historical phases outlined by Mudu. They are now working on regularization proposals that would transform their current precarious and illegal situation into permanent council flats and community centres without eviction or displacement.

While this paper does not focus on the 'regeneration' process, as housing scholars, we should be receptive to this ongoing dynamic. We must avoid analysing it solely through an all-encompassing understanding of Anglo-American housing financialization processes. Instead, we should develop more nuanced and grounded tools to fight for housing justice. Therefore, the fourth phase of this history, to paraphrase Mudu's tripartite historical analysis, is still being written.

Funding Details

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