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Fighting gentrification from the boxing ring: how community gyms reclaim the right to the city

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ABSTRACT

This article explores ‘community gyms’ as prefigurative counter spaces where sport is experienced as a political practice. Emerging in the framework of political squats in Italy and beyond, community gyms constitute an integral part of today’s right to the city mobilization, with two unique contributions. Firstly, they reclaim the right to leisure space as a fundamental component of the struggle against gentrification. Secondly, they introduce to a critical approach to urban development also individuals who would otherwise not embrace anti-systemic politics. Specifically, the article analyses the spatial dimension of community gyms. It exposes how they constitute a bulwark against the commodification and gentrification of the urban habitat, recovering vacant or abandoned buildings to return them to the locals and embodying an alternative model of urban development centered on people rather than profit. The article also explores the gyms’ relational dimension, showing how community gyms nurture novel relationships of care, in three ways: they include and give agency to marginalized subjects, they forge militants through sport practice, and seek to mitigate the socio-economic needs of their social surroundings. In so doing, the article shows that leisure, too, can create moments of disruption able to generate change, and that sport, when understood as a political act, can unsettle the capitalist logic of commodification of leisure. Inspired by a carnal sociology approach to social research, this article is based on original data gathered by means of in-depth interviewing, ethnographic observation and document analysis.

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Introduction

The neoliberal economic restructuring typical of this crisis-prone era has accelerated the transformation of the urban habitat. As a result, urban dwellers from the four corners of the globe increasingly denounce the unsustainability of capitalist forms of urbanization and their effects on the socio-economic sphere (Brenner et al., 2012). Gentrification, to name just one, reconfigures the local landscape of residence and consumption, displacing low-income and working-class residents (Newman & Wyly, 2006). Commodification and privatization affect both public spaces and services, multiplying social inequality and

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exclusion (Brown-Saracino, 2010). To oppose and contain these phenomena, grassroots groups have articulated a new agenda for political activism, gathering diverse subjects under the ‘right to the city’ slogan (Mayer, 2012; Mayer et al., 2016). Informal groupings have emerged alongside anti-austerity movements (Ancelovici et al., 2016; Della Porta, 2015) to reclaim the citizens’ right to participate in decision-making related to city planning (Castells, 1983; D. Harvey, 2012; Mitchell, 2003). They have also appropriated vacant buildings to open ‘cracks in the hard surface of austerity urbanism’ (Tonkiss, 2013, p. 317).

While much literature on the right to the city focuses on political and housing occupations (see, among others, Andretta et al., 2015; Grazioli & Caciagli, 2018; Lopez et al., 2014; Martínez López, 2013; Squatting Europe Kolective, 2014), little attention has been devoted to the re-appropriation of space for leisure and recreational purposes (Milan, 2019; Pedrini, 2018). This article fills the gap by focusing on what Lefebvre calls leisure space, which ‘bridges the gap between traditional spaces (...) based on work and its demands, and potential spaces of enjoyment and joy’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 385). It explores a particular type of leisure space, namely *palestre popolari* as they are known in Italian – in English ‘grassroots’ or ‘community’ gyms (see also Virgili, 2018). As we shall see, the attribute *popolare* indicates that these projects present themselves as the ‘people’s gyms’ in opposition to commercial fitness clubs.

Self-organized gyms repurpose abandoned or vacant buildings where to collectively practice sport. Rather than conceiving leisure as an end in itself, these gyms engage in a strategic political intervention aimed at making recreational activities accessible also to marginalized parts of the population. In so doing, community gyms posit themselves as ‘counter-spaces’, that is to say ‘initially utopian alternative[s]’ (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 349) liberated from the afflictions of routine duties and commitments. Lefebvre, however, warned about the commodification of leisure in the capitalist society (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 383). Contrary to his observation that leisure tends to be functional to capitalist accumulation, we maintain that community gyms escape this trend by creating moments of disruption able to spark social and political change. There, practitioners can enjoy leisure time outside capitalist dynamics that posit the individual as consumer rather than political subject.

Building on semi-structured interviews with sixteen trainers and athletes in community gyms across Italy, document analysis as well as a multi-year ethnography, this article looks at community gyms as vehicle of re-appropriation of space in the neoliberal urban scenario and as arenas for political activism. It explores the internal and outward dynamics of these multifaceted self-managed initiatives that promote sport, and combat sports in particular, as a *political practice*. In so doing, this article contributes to rethinking leisure as a means for political engagement in times of economic hardship and precarious labor, and reflects upon the role of sport, and leisure more in general, in promoting social and political change (see also Haenfler et al., 2012; J. Harvey et al., 2014; Dart & Wagg, 2016).

The article is organized as follows. We first review the literature on neoliberal urbanization and the right to the city, conceptualizing community gyms as advocates of a ‘right to leisure space’ that feeds the broader right to the city activist agenda. Next, we describe the methods and data underpinning the research. We then insert community gyms in their socio-cultural *milieu*, situating them within the ecosystem of contemporary

Italian social movements. Following, we analyze community gyms as i) counter spaces that work as bulwark to the spread of consumption and profit-based forms of urbanization, and ii) the flywheel of social relationships of mutual aid aimed at fighting against socio-spatial exclusion. We conclude by reflecting on the contributions of this article to our understanding of contemporary social movements and their relation to space and leisure more in general.

Neoliberal urbanization, right to the city and the right to leisure space

Earlier research exposed how dynamics of urban change intertwine with the trajectories of capitalism (Lefebvre, 1991). Neoliberal urbanization processes, in particular, are functional to maintaining the capitalist system, with detrimental effects on a cityscape 'killed by rampant capitalist development (...) and sprawling urban growth no matter what the social, environmental, or political consequences' (D. Harvey, 2012, pp. xv–xvi). Among others, this results in the requalification of neglected neighborhoods that produces the displacement and social exclusion of less privileged parts of the population, pushed to the edge of society and physically to its outskirts. In this context, 'right to the city' indicates the right of inhabitants to participate in the decisions and the actions that produce urban space (Purcell, 2002). This type of activism opposes and resists the urban restructuring of cities not *per se*, but for the negative consequences this brings about, including commodification of public space and gentrification. While urban planning policies privatizing space tend to turn this right 'into a narrow, individual right, reserved for a limited economic and political elite' (Hansen & Karpantschhof, 2016, p. 178), right to the city advocates stress its collective nature.

The urban habitat becomes an object of contention, with citizens increasingly seeing it as a laboratory for social action (D. Harvey, 2012). In this framework, the response to neoliberal urbanization takes two paths, namely 'symbolic (a rejection of corporate values) and practical (offering an affordable alternative to consumers or residents)' (Creasap, 2016, p. 795). The latter is embraced by right to the city activists when they resort to the occupation of empty buildings to convert into political or housing squats (Martínez, 2007; Pruijt, 2013). Following the 2008 financial and economic crisis, occupation have massively increased in number and intensity in Southern Europe (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015). Do-It-Yourself initiatives such as community kitchens and food banks multiplied, gaining a central spot in the action repertoire of both the radical left (Kousis & Paschou, 2017) and the extreme right (Froio & Gattinara, 2017).

In Italy, taking over abandoned buildings to return them to the collectivity for housing and cultural purposes has a long tradition dating back to the 1970s (Cattaneo & Engel-Di Mauro, 2015; Mudu, 2004, 2012). Oftentimes, urban squatting aims at providing an immediate response to housing needs when these are not fulfilled by the state (Cattaneo & Martinez, 2014; Martinez, 2018). In Italy, however, 'political squats' – vacant or abandoned dwellings occupied without the consent of the owner by activists driven by an anti-systemic political motive (Pruijt, 2013) – are predominant. These 'liberated spaces' (Piazza, 2018) seek to meet the need for political and cultural expression, and to become autonomous from the influence of both the capitalist system and left-wing parties (Mudu, 2004). The potential of these political squats 'lies not in their ability to turn things upside down in an instant' (Tonkiss, 2005, p. 64), but in advancing the idea of

a ‘self-changing society’ able to directly intervene on some of its core problems ‘by means of the very action itself’ (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015, p. 369). By ‘creating alternative realities, standing in opposition to commodification of public space and to populism, nationalism, or xenophobia’, political squats constitute activism on their own and ‘not merely a “preamble” to a “more real” activism’ (Goldstein, 2017, p. 1469). And it is in the premises of these political squats that we find the community gyms investigated in this article.

Social movement studies tend to focus on more traditional politically oriented appropriation of public and/or private space, with grassroots leisure activities remaining one of the theoretical blind spots (Milan, 2019). This article contributes to deepening the agenda of the right to the city mobilization to include also the appropriation of space for recreational purposes. On the one hand, it positions community gyms as central features of the broader right to the city mobilization and situates the struggle for leisure space in the framework of urban movements reclaiming space from the dynamics of capitalist accumulation. In fact, community gyms intertwine and at times cooperate with grassroots groups engaged in the fight for affordable housing, and the housing rights movement in particular.

On the other hand, the article understands community gyms as *a specific form of appropriation of the city*. ‘[E]nabling the full and complete usage of (...) moments and places’ reclaimed from capitalist accumulation (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 179), community gyms appropriate a space in which the use-value is freed from its domination by exchange-value typical of neoliberalism (Mitchell, 2003, p. 19). To make this argument we draw on Lefebvre’s distinction between the right to appropriation of urban space and the right to property. The former conceives space as inclusive and collective whereas the latter sees it in exclusionary terms and aims at monetizing it (Lefebvre, 1996). More precisely, ‘the right to appropriation includes the right of inhabitants to physically access, occupy and use urban space’ as well as ‘the right to produce urban space so that it meets the needs of inhabitants’ (Purcell, 2002, p. 103).

Community gyms grant access to key city resources like space, actively subtracting both vital space (otherwise likely to be privatized) and users to mainstream gyms. Furthermore, they actively engage in the political struggle aimed at revitalizing the area in which they are located. They do so not for the benefit of tourists or for profit, but for making it accessible to the wider population, including marginalized categories. However, community gyms add two original elements to the right to the city as it is commonly conceived by Lefebvre and others. Firstly, community gyms expand the notion of leisure to include also sport practice. Thus, reclaiming leisure becomes a political act in itself. Secondly, they articulate a right to leisure space that is explicitly antithetical to the commodification imperative that characterizes mainstream clubs. This right concerns the right of individuals to enjoy recreational activities in a space that is liberated from profit-oriented logics.

Methodological notes

Qualitative data for this article have been gathered through semi-structured interviewing, ethnographic observation, and document analysis in ten community gyms throughout Italy from December 2017 to June 2019. The selected gyms originate in large

metropolitan areas (Rome, Milan and Naples) as well as medium-size cities across the country (Padua, Bologna, Florence and Catania). Most of them, such as *Palestra Gogo Rigacci* in Florence, emerged in the framework of political squats or housing occupations, with which they entertain relationship of collaboration and comradeship. Others, like *Palestra Popolare Etnea* in Catania, are self-standing projects. Others again, by contrast, represent the first occupations in the neighborhood, paving the way for further occupations.

We conducted sixteen in-depth interviews, including group conversations. Our respondents, predominantly males in their 30s, include volunteer trainers and militants actively involved in the gym management. The gender ratio of our respondents reflects the predominance of men in leadership positions, evidenced in both our fieldwork and our ethnographic boxing practice. Although we count ourselves amongst the relatively scarce percentage of female boxing athletes, we did not pursue a gender-balanced representation, on account of leadership positions (e.g., coaches) being largely occupied by male sport practitioners. Questions explored, among others, the internal organizational dynamics of the gym, and in particular how social interactions produce the space of community gyms, as well as the relation with the neighborhood and political practice more in general. The involvement in the life of the political squat to which the gym belongs forms an integral part of the observation, as the squats are a key ingredient in the 'structural history' of the dynamics we observe (Bourdieu, 1988, pp. 154–155). This is why the boundaries between the role of trainer, activist and athlete are often blurred, with management in particular intersecting activities of political organizing.

But sport in community gyms embodies many informal 'unwritten, unspoken rules' (Paradis, 2012, p. 83), which would be hard to situate with interview data alone. Conjoining reflection and practice, we individually engaged in a five-year ethnography that took us to regularly practice boxing in grassroots gyms in Italy and the Netherlands.¹ Our double role as boxers and researchers facilitated our access to the field, with however all the potential drawbacks of militant ethnography, including the challenge of retaining critical distance (Juris, 2007). Whenever possible, we actively participated in the boxing trainings of the gyms analyzed in the article, and in the outings that often followed (e.g., drinks or social dinners). In addition, we partook in informal conversations in both the gym premises and social media, including dedicated WhatsApp groups. Practicing boxing allowed us to use our body to fully understand what it means to actually train in a community gym. Boxing, in fact, is 'the key sport through which community gyms create their own identity' (Virgili, 2018, p. 205). Our involvement with the field is inspired by what French sociologist Loïc Wacquant termed 'carnal sociology' (Wacquant, 2004), an approach to social research based on deploying the researcher's body in action in the field. As 'a path to embodied knowledge' (García & Spencer, 2013, p. 1), boxing training empowered us to 'grasp action-in-the-making' (Wacquant, 2015, p. 1) as training in community gyms encounters the practice of neighborhood self-organization and the politics of the Italian radical left. This approach best takes into account that the 'space of sports must (...) be related to the social space of which it is an expression' (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 154).

Finally, we analyzed a large amount of documentary material both printed and digital, including pamphlets, flyers, books, websites and social media. This was designed to connect with the flurry of the gyms' subcultural production over the last half decade,

which signals an interest within the community itself in reflecting on the role of space in the fight against the commodification of the city. This material complemented the spoken word of participants and our own embodied observation by exposing us to the gyms' self-representation vis-à-vis their socio-cultural and political context.

Mapping the field: inside community gyms

In Italy, the first organized forms of 'sport for all' (*sport popolare*) explicitly addressing the working class emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, when the workers' movement started promoting an inclusive approach to sport, made accessible to all regardless of performance results (Senatori, 2015). In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when among other things gym membership became harder to sustain for many youths, political squats, too, began offering sport activities. Today, most squats in Italy are equipped with gyms where practitioners overturn the mainstream narrative of sport as an ephemeral, hedonistic practice and as politically neutral, reclaiming instead its potential for social transformation (Associazione Leib, 2019).

Community gyms facilitate the practice of sport by individuals regardless of gender, age, class, and proficiency, re-appropriating sports practice as a 'vehicle for progressive social change' (Kaufman & Wolff, 2010). They represent also a 'safe space'² freed from the consumption-oriented practices and competitive logics of the shiny, expensive-looking mainstream gyms. Training here is offered at a low cost (or entirely free of charge) on account of the 'accessibility policy' (Pedrini, 2018, p. 12) at the core of these projects. Our ethnographic observations in these gyms reveal the important role played by classical cleavages, most notably class and income, in determining audiences, focal activities and narratives of practitioners. As a trainer explained,

Today sport has been completely taken away from working class people, there is just not the same access as there used to be. (...) Today sport has become a commodity in the worst manner possible, I call gyms (in a joking way) the shopping malls of sport. You need a bank account, you need an IBAN, you spend 100 euros a month ... which a working-class person just cannot afford. So our logic was that with the term '*popolare*' we have given back to the people what has been taken from them. ("Full Transcribed Interview with CoNaSP Trainers Giulio" (Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbano) and Luigi" (Palestra Popolare Palermo)' 2018)

Skill sharing is particularly emphasized, with volunteer trainers putting their expertise and experience at the service of other participants; upcoming trainers are often former team members. Disciplines on offer range from combat sports to yoga, from artistic gymnastics to acrobatics. Combat sport and martial arts, however, play a pivotal role in this setup (Virgili, 2018), for their connection to the imaginary of a 'subproletarian bodily craft' associated with impoverished ghettos (Wacquant, 1992, p. 221). Unlike mainstream gyms where sport practice is an end in itself, in community gym sport becomes associated with the expression of the socio-political values of the radical left³ (Pedrini, 2017). Although a clear-cut political orientation is not a prerequisite for joining the gym, non-negotiable values include anti-racism, anti-sexism and anti-fascism – 'three pillars on which we cannot compromise' according to a coach from Bologna.⁴

Community gyms intervene in the urban space 'liberating' (Lefebvre, 1991) it for the practice of sport and inhabiting it in the activists' own terms. Performing 'everyday

utopias' (Cooper, 2013), they operate in the realm of prefigurative politics where alternative forms of life and sociality are experimented 'here and now'. In this manner, they create interstitial spaces of autonomy – that is to say, 'makeshift' spaces in-between where activists and the community as a whole can experience and practice self-determination (Tonkiss, 2013). By radically transforming the experience as well as the imaginaries associated with sport and public space, community gyms contribute to overturn institutionalized roles, identities and social relations – in sport and beyond. This is well illustrated by the activists of *Je So' Pazzo* (literally: I am crazy), a Neapolitan political squat whose name was chosen by the first occupiers 'because in a world where normality consists of unemployment, precariousness, racial and gender discrimination (...), we dare to call ourselves crazy and organize to speak against all of this and build from below an alternative to the grey and desperate world that we see every day' (*Je So' Pazzo*, n.a., own translation). While training in the *Je So' Pazzo* gym, we could observe first-hand the heterogeneity of subjectivities as they try to negotiate common ground through sport practice.

Oftentimes community gyms emerge in the framework of political squats, in themselves reclaimed buildings (see also Piazza, 2012). Their relation to political squats varies considerably. We introduce a threefold taxonomy to illustrate the relation between community gyms and their surrounding squatting scene. In the first, community gyms emerge in the context of political squats, of which they become an integral part, acting as drivers of socio-political aggregation alongside concerts and cultural initiatives. They might however retain a certain degree of autonomy visible for instance, in separate constituencies and assemblies. This is the case of *Palestra Popolare 'Teofilo Stevenson'* within the political squat XM24 in Bologna. In the second configuration, represented for instance, by the *Palestra Popolare Etnea* in Catania, community gyms are not directly related to the surrounding squatting scene, although they might rely on similar action repertoires (most notably direct action) and collaborate on side initiatives with local activists. Finally, community gyms can act as forerunners of local occupations, kickstarting a political project that might eventually evolve into a broader and more inclusive project of urban requalification from below. *Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbanò* is a case in point.

We contend that community gyms play an important role in movement building. They form an integral part of the Italian radical social movement scene, that is to say 'a network of people who share a set of subcultural or countercultural beliefs, values, norms, and convictions as well as a network of physical spaces where members of that group are known to congregate' (Haunss & Leach, 2008, p. 260). On the one hand, they embody the underground counterculture values of the most 'autonomous "subterranean" actors' within contemporary progressive movements (Flesher Fominaya, 2017, p. 3). Interestingly, they are 'transgenerational', as they 'gather more than one generation of militants, each contributing their own experience of activism'.⁵ On the other hand, as we shall see, they also contribute to fuel the very same movements by appealing to and engaging even newcomers who are foreign to this ideology. In so doing, community gyms often function as 'movement-building machines', generating 'social capital, networks, solidarities, meanings, frames, identities, knowledges, strategies, skills, and repertoires' (Juris et al., 2014, p. 330).

In what follows, we illustrate how community gyms actively resist the negative impact of neoliberal urbanism by focusing on their spatial dimension.

The spatial dimension: community gyms as bulwark against the neoliberal city

Twelve people train in the narrow rooms that used to house a bakery. The walls are covered with old and recent posters from street demonstrations and campaigns or picturing the regular paraphernalia of the radical left; the makeshift changing room is also a self-organized library with a clear political connotation. There is no central heating, although it is a cold February evening. You must ring the bell to enter; nothing signals that people are training behind the rusty, lowered shutters. The imperative to ‘reclaim the city’ is a matter-of-fact lived experience here, as the gym is located on the ground floor of a historical housing occupation; the coach himself has lived here for several years (field-work notes).

As the fieldwork notes from our visit to the *Panetteria Occupata (Conte Rosso Boxe)* in Milan illustrate, community gyms are the result of a political and historical process which *produces* counter spaces that come to constitute fundamental building blocks in the struggle against the commodification of the city. More specifically, gyms intervene in the urban space in two main ways: a) they reclaim and recover space to give it back to the local community, and b) they promote and enact a distinct model of urban development that centers on people rather than profit. In so doing, community gyms function as a bulwark against neoliberal urban development. However, gyms differ from political squats more in general because they appeal to individuals who would otherwise not embrace anti-systemic politics and pass on knowledge, also of political nature, by means of sport practice. Actively engaging people in the process of spatial transformation, gyms contribute to raise awareness about the right to the city agenda, bringing individuals closer to a critical approach to urban development.

Community gyms often occupy disputed areas, with private actors or public institutions (or both) claiming rent or ownership or having more profitable exploitation plans. This is why they are simultaneously object of the commodification of the neoliberal city and subjects of the resistance to it. They are object of commodification as they emerge in the framework of contested spaces, like the political squats they are often part of. But they are also protagonists of the struggle against commodification, as they reclaim and take responsibility for space that would otherwise be abandoned or privatized, returning it to the citizenry (cf. Micheletti & McFarland, 2011). In so doing, they provide socio-cultural *loci* of aggregation to the neighborhood in which they are located, while exposing the contradictions inherent in the neoliberal urbanization model characterized by the shrinking of areas available for public enjoyment.

In Naples, for instance, the gym is located in the premises of *Je So' Pazzo*, a monastery converted into a psychiatric jail and later abandoned until it was squatted in 2015. The complex has rapidly become an important center of aggregation in the impoverished neighborhood of Materdei. Besides the gym, it hosts free legal counselling and medical services catering to the locals, including migrants. Furthermore, it makes an explicit effort to reconfigure what sport means in relation to political practice, understood as engagement with local needs, as the following quote illustrates:

We focus on the issue of space, of social and economic obstacles that do not allow individuals to enjoy the fundamental right of practicing sport, and from there we move on to reclaim the right to health. We connect sport to the right to health, the closure of hospitals, the fact that you have to pay for basic health services.⁶

Le Sberle del Volga, a women-only boxing group, trains in *Ri-Make*, a former school in the peripheral Affori district of Milan turned into a ‘space of mutual aid and social appropriation’ which includes a community kitchen.⁷ In Rome, the *Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbano*, in the suburban township of Tufello and named after a 19-year-old local leftist militant killed in 1980 by a neofascist commando, recovered a disused boiler hall previously servicing the surrounding social housing compound. In Catania, local artists in the central but dilapidated district of San Cristoforo ‘occupied and gave back to the citizenry’⁸ *Midulla*, an old cinema hall abandoned following a fire. They transformed it into a gym and a circus school, employed also for cultural activities like theatre and services such as cost-free psychological counselling and afterschooling for children at risk. As their self-presentation flyer reads, ‘*Midulla* belongs to the city, and to the city it returns!’ (*Il Midulla è della città e alla città ritorna*). These examples show how these projects are about ‘hand[ing] back to the people what has been taken away from them’,⁹ in times of widespread privatization of public space and services, low occupational rates, and scarce public funding for socio-cultural projects.

Besides reclaiming space, community gyms prefigure and experiment with a distinct vision for urban development – one that centers on people’s needs and desires. This is particularly important in impoverished social settings and peripheral townships like Tufello (Rome). ‘In a neighborhood like this you must get your hands dirty, talk to the people, understand what they need. You can show them that there are alternatives [e.g., to petty crime], and they will eventually think “if he made it, I will too”’, told us a trainer active in the area.¹⁰ The same holds true for districts hit by ‘studentification’ (Smith, 2004), a particular form of gentrification that shapes the real estate market on the increased presence of students, monetizing also leisure and communal spaces. In Novoli, at the outskirts of Florence, a group of activists of the housing movement have squatted since 2018 several buildings around the flashy new university campus. They wanted to provide a shelter to undocumented migrants who could not afford market rents and create spaces of aggregation for students outside commercial logics. The community gym dedicated to Gogo Rigacci, a young partisan of the Italian Resistance killed by Nazi-fascists in the adjacent square, is located on the ground floor of one of these housing squats. In a neighborhood with ‘strong contradictions, where Italians live alongside foreigners, and both groups are in a condition of economic distress and impoverishment’,¹¹ the gym provides a unique opportunity for distinct groups – both likely to be hit by the rising spatial exclusion (Mudu, 2004) – to mingle and support each other.

Community gyms do not cater exclusively to hardcore militants but develop a strong relationship with the neighborhood in which they are located. As the self-presentation of *Je So’ Pazzo* reads, the overall goal of the occupation is to provide answers to the ‘loneliness, the generalized anxiety for our future, and individualism’ produced by the capitalist system while ‘starting from the concrete needs’ of the local population (*Je So’ Pazzo*, n.a., own translation). This is why oftentimes gyms are active promoters of initiatives aimed at re-qualifying and revitalizing the area in which they are situated.

While there is no standard blueprint, the alternative vision put forward by community gyms adapts to their socio-geographical contexts. The process starts with the identification of local needs. For example, the ‘requalification from below’ of the above-mentioned neighborhood of San Cristoforo (Catania) began when the group of local youths who founded the gym ‘adopted the neighborhood’ and ‘listened to its needs’.¹² Their first action was to reclaim the main square from illegal parking and petty mafia activities to install makeshift benches, a book-crossing service and a café. To get the pulse of the community, the group organizes regular walks open to all and aimed at getting to know the city from the point of view of its inhabitants and collectively re-imagine it. In Bologna the *Teofilo Stevenson* gym, named after the symbolic figure of a Cuban boxer, occasionally staged community trainings, invited locals for walks around the neighborhood, and put up street food stands to offer tea or breakfast as a way to raise awareness of the political implications of sport. Located in the multicultural neighborhood of *La Bolognina*, home mostly to ‘the working class and migrants’,¹³ the gym was part of the political squat XM24, recently evicted. As one of the coaches explained: ‘We are a political reality, not only a sport one. When we go to the neighborhood, we try to work with local youth to offset the predominant macho attitude’ widespread in society.¹⁴ In turn, militants tending to community gyms can count on the support, collaboration and solidarity of the neighborhood. When the *Verbano* gym in Rome was set on fire by far-right militants in 2018, it was restored thanks to the manual labor of the locals, as the following quote illustrates:

It is like if the gym has turned into a monument. After the fire, there was this tremendous response, an incredible solidarity. We managed to restore everything in two days also with the crucial help of many neighbours who had never even set foot in the gym before. People donated what they could, came to help with manual labor, brought us food¹⁵

Next section further explores these novel relationships of solidarity spearheaded by community gyms.

The relational dimension: community gyms against socio-spatial exclusion

We know from the literature that any social space is the result of the social relations subtending to and creating it (D. Harvey, 2012). How do community gyms produce a shared counter space based on inclusion and enact their vision of a different society? We argue that community gyms produce novel relationships explicitly aimed at opposing the socio-spatial exclusion and the alienation typical of neoliberal urbanism. They do so in three domains: at the level of the individual practitioner, the internal gym dynamics, and the neighborhood.

The primary intervention of community gyms is in the realm of individual engagement. The gyms embody the possibility for low-income, racialized and nonconforming subjects to resist mainstream patterns of socio-spatial exclusion. Existing research has uncovered how the neoliberal model of urban development pushes to the margins ‘individuals whose identity undermine the homogeneity of the contemporary city’ (McCann, 1999, p. 169). These marginalized segments of the population include but are not limited to undocumented migrants, the unemployed, or disempowered youths and families. Community gyms revert this trend, promoting inclusion processes that

involve *also* the less privileged and socially disadvantaged groups and provide them with occasions of aggregation and socialization through the universal language of sport. Moreover, owing to sport practice these social actors are empowered to reclaim and exercise political agency. For instance, the very first coach of the *Palestra Popolare Etnea*, in the Sicilian city of Catania, was an undocumented migrant from Senegal. Located in the central but run-down neighborhood of San Berillo, the gym caters to youngsters of various social extraction, with a prevalence of migrants, in an area that offers no other sport clubs or open-air fields. Amongst its activities it features also *laamb* (Senegalese wrestling) trainings. The entrance hall showcases a large graffiti reading ‘Here sport is anti-racist’ (*Qui lo sport é antirazzista*). According to one of our respondents, the fact that practicing sport might represent a potential career trajectory for practitioners ‘offers a viable perspective also to individuals who would otherwise be tempted to join the local mafia’.¹⁶ Moreover, the aspiration to inclusion of community gyms extends also to other groupings such as female and non-gender conforming practitioners. For one, in a predominantly male-dominated discipline like boxing, ‘redefining the way of doing sport including a gender perspective’ entails challenging ‘the categories of masculine and feminine’ (Virgili, 2018, pp. 199–200). It is ‘a struggle that we have to undertake collectively’, argued the only female trainer amongst our respondents, but also a ‘personal trajectory where I myself have to have the courage to say “I can do it, and I can even do it well”’.¹⁷

Secondly, zooming in on the internal dynamics of the gyms, we note how community gyms contribute to forge politically aware individuals through sport practice. With their emphasis on shared leisure and exercise, the gyms represent in fact a playground for social and political engagement alongside oftentimes more radical forms of activism. Helping to build a broader sense of community, gyms create a preamble for more public activism, as the right to the city is enacted in the re-appropriation of leisure space. More specifically, it is in the co-creation of the counter space that political subjects and active militants emerge. These are forged through both practical activities (e.g., jointly tending to the gym, including cleaning it after practice) and the experience of relationships modelled on progressive values such as equality and mutual support.

Rather than ‘users’ or ‘consumers’, practitioners of community gyms are active subjects expected to contribute in the first person to the maintenance of the reclaimed space. Athletes are also invited to participate in the social, cultural and political life of the squat of which the gym is an integral part. The level of engagement may vary, and it is by any means not compulsory. However, it represents a fundamental moment of aggregation and socialization, contributing to producing and reproducing a shared identity which ties up the political values of the squat to the changing room dynamics typical of most sport disciplines. The trainer of a community gym in Florence articulates the importance of being both an athlete and a militant as follows:

We like the idea that people who participate in the gym are later involved in a series of activities and moments of discussion, including political actions and demonstrations, that are not directly part of the boxing club activities. We deliberately chose to avoid a formalized assembly of the gym alone to rather take advantage of any opportunity to chat and discuss, mixing sport and politics.¹⁸

Politics is not necessarily the main common ground or focal topic of discussion during the trainings, as the emphasis remains largely on the dynamics of sport practice. Some militants even maintain that politics and political belonging should not to be made constantly explicit, especially with youngest athletes. On the contrary, values and ideologies are to be passed on by means of fostering collegial, respectful relations between practitioners regardless of gender or ability. As a coach put it, ‘you see the difference [between athletes of mainstream gyms and those of community gyms] in the competition, in the way they relate to each other and to their opponents’.¹⁹

Finally, the renewed relationships of care experimented within the gym typically reach also the surrounding social setting. In a city envisioning space primarily for consumerist activities, the role of community gyms extends well beyond sport practice to intersect social needs outside of its immediate remit. In neglected social contexts, these gyms respond to the imperative of ‘filling the void in townships abandoned by institutions’²⁰ also by means of mutual aid activities based on solidarity principles. As the coach of *Je So’ Pazzo* (Naples) explained, ‘We must keep working on the small scale, at the municipal level, at the district (*rione*) level, in the neighborhood, also as a disruptive force able to showcase concrete possibilities to exercise self-organization and self-government’.²¹ Along the same line, the *Midulla* group is proud to have managed to ‘involve citizens, and youngsters in particular, in the care of the neighborhood’,²² playing a key role in mending the social fabric of the city endangered by gentrification or simply urban decay.

While almost all the community gyms surveyed here actively try to forge a strong relationship with the neighborhood, their impact in the local context appears to be particularly relevant in Southern Italy. There, most of the community gyms emerged in deprived areas characterized by high unemployment and skyrocketing school dropout rates, often aggravated by the presence of organized crime. As the coordinators of *Palestra Popolare Etnea* explained, ‘our gym seeks to promote sport as a potential means of socioeconomic redemption outside of commercial channels like business-oriented exploitative football clubs. We want to show a way out to the kids but also to their families, offering a concrete example of how commitment to sport means individual growth’. The gym involves youngsters who oftentimes work in the informal economy from an early age, and caters to ‘kids who are always here, because we are the only center of aggregation in the hood’.²³ Other gym organizers also pointed to the pedagogical role of sport as ‘school of life’ able to transmit ‘good values’ which provide an alternative to the distorted values diffused in their social surroundings.²⁴ In other words, when the social context in which gyms operate is characterized by limited chances for young people, diffused crime and/or scarcity (or total absence) of services like sport clubs or cultural centers, the gym absolves to a more complex function, offering a variety of services on top of sport practice.

Conclusions

This article conceived of community gyms as counter spaces where sport is experienced as a political practice molded on self-organization, inclusion and accessibility. We adopted a ‘carnal sociology’ approach to observe from up close the spatial and relational dynamics of *palestre popolari* in Italy as they emerge in reclaimed spaces like political squats. We understood these gyms as an integral part of today’s right to the city

mobilization, with two unique contributions: they reclaim the right to leisure space as a fundamental component of the struggle against neoliberal urbanism and they reach out to individuals who would otherwise not approach leftist radical politics. We disclosed the prefigurative role of community gyms in disrupting the dynamics of the neoliberal city by translating into practice an alternative model of social organization based on the idea of a self-changing society. We saw how they play an important role in movement building, as they are part of the social movement scene of the autonomous left and function as movement-building machines. They constitute a bulwark against the commodification and gentrification of the urban habitat as they recover space to return it to the locals, and they embody an alternative model of urban development centered on people rather than profit. Moreover, they contribute to spearhead novel relationships at the individual, gym and neighborhood levels, namely: they involve marginalized subjects giving them agency, forge politically aware individuals, and reach out with mutual aid interventions addressing their social surroundings.

This study provides a two-fold contribution to our understanding of contemporary social movements. The first is of empirical nature, as the article provides original data on Italian *palestre popolari* seen in relation to their social context as well as the autonomous leftist scene, and offers a taxonomy to understand them in relation to the surrounding squatting scene. While this phenomenon has only recently started to gather the attention of scholars, we have found similar initiatives in other European countries, including France, Spain and Greece. The second is a theoretical contribution, as the article shows that leisure, too, can create moments of disruption able to generate change, in particular when the individual evolves from being a mere consumer of leisure into a politically aware subject. Building upon Lefebvre, the article exposes how, when sport is conceived of as a political act, it can unsettle the capitalist logic of commodification of leisure. Furthermore, this article contributes to expand our understanding of the right to the city to include what we have called the *right to leisure space*, overcoming the dichotomy between politics and leisure and the definition of leisure as a merely recreational act.

It remains to be explored how the infrastructure and constituencies of community gyms complement or even alter existing taxonomies of the squatting movement (Pruijt, 2013), and in particular existing academic readings of the Italian social centers scene (Piazza, 2012). Another promising direction of inquiry might investigate how our analysis intersects other ways of conceiving of engagement that at face value might appear non-political, such as ‘creative participation’ (Micheletti & McFarland, 2011) or ‘lifestyle movements’ (Haenfler et al., 2012) and how it contributes to our understanding of ‘the spatialities of contentious politics’ (Sbicca & Perdue, 2014, p. 309; see also Creasap, 2016). Further research is also needed to understand the long-term trajectories of community gyms in the context of an increasingly privatized urban habitat, where large corporations of the likes of Google reclaim a guiding role in imagining and planning the city of the future.

Notes

1. *Palestra Popolare CPA-FI Sud* and *Sportvereniging Bep Kneppers* in Amsterdam, respectively. Both are part of an emerging informal network of community gyms across Europe.

Our active engagement with boxing, however, pre-dates our research agenda on community gyms as a political arena.

2. Interview with a leading member of *Polisportiva San Precario* (CSOA Pedro), Padua, 26 January 2018.
3. However, the political orientation of community gyms is not exclusively leftist. In Italy and Greece, for example, a number of community gyms practicing combat sports are associated with the far right and analogous identitarian movements, where physical violence aims at harming the opponent (Zidan, 2018).
4. Interview with a boxing coach of *Palestra Popolare Teofilo Stevenson* (XM24), Bologna, 10 December 2017.
5. Interview with a leading member of *Polisportiva San Precario* (CSOA Pedro), Padua, 26 January 2018.
6. Interview with a boxing coach of *Palestra Popolare* (ex-OPG Je So' Pazzo), Naples, 6 April 2018.
7. Conversation with the athletes of *Le Sberle del Volga* (Ri-Make), Milan, 22 February 2019.
8. Interview with the trainers of *Piccola Scuola Popolare di Circo Sociale e Giocoleria* (Centro Polifunzionale Midulla), Catania, 27 April 2019.
9. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbano*, Rome, 3 June 2019.
10. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbano*, Rome, 3 June 2019.
11. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Gogo Rigacci*, Florence, 25 February 2019.
12. Interview with the trainers of *Piccola Scuola Popolare di Circo Sociale e Giocoleria* (Centro Polifunzionale Midulla), Catania, 27 April 2019.
13. Interview with a boxing coach of *Palestra Popolare Teofilo Stevenson* (XM24), Bologna, 10 December 2017.
14. Interview with a boxing coach of *Palestra Popolare Teofilo Stevenson* (XM24), Bologna, 10 December 2017.
15. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbano*, Rome, 3 June 2019.
16. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Etnea*, Catania, 27 April 2019.
17. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Gogo Rigacci*, Florence, 25 February 2019.
18. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Gogo Rigacci*, Florence, 25 February 2019.
19. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbano*, Rome, 3 June 2019.
20. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbano*, Rome, 3 June 2019.
21. Interview with a boxing coach of *Palestra Popolare* (ex-OPG Je So' Pazzo), Naples, 6 April 2018.
22. Interview with the trainers of *Piccola Scuola Popolare di Circo Sociale e Giocoleria* (Centro Polifunzionale Midulla), Catania, 27 April 2019.
23. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Etnea*, Catania, 27 April 2019.
24. Interview with the boxing trainer of *Palestra Popolare Valerio Verbano*, Rome, 3 June 2019.

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