

Please cite the Published Version

Di Felicianantonio, C (2017) Spaces of the Expelled as Spaces of the Urban Commons? Analysing the Re-emergence of Squatting Initiatives in Rome. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 41 (5). pp. 708-725. ISSN 0309-1317

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.12513>

Publisher: Wiley

Version: Accepted Version

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Spaces of the expelled as spaces of the urban commons? Analyzing the re-emergence of squatting initiatives in Rome*

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Abstract

Asserting the need to take into account the role played by the current crisis and austerity politics in fostering the re-emergence of squatting initiatives in Rome, the paper bridges the literature on squatting as an urban social movement, notably Martinez' holistic approach (2013), with a more political economy-oriented perspective analysing the current stage of 'late neoliberalism'. In doing so, I use the conceptualization of "expulsions" developed by Sassen (2014), showing how the emerging squatting initiatives in Rome represent the "spaces of the expelled". Focusing on the case of Communia in the neighbourhood of San Lorenzo, the paper shows how Martinez approach is able to account the rapid success and support gained by Communia, because going beyond the "single-demand" perspective that has dominated much squatting literature. Indeed the main claims addressed by Communia activists concern a plurality of issues regrouped around the concept of urban commons, declined as both a practice and a goal. Methodologically, the paper is the result of eighteen months-fieldwork based on an activist/participatory action research (PAR) approach, made of participant observation/observant participation, in-depth interviews and questionnaires.

Key words

Squatting- Expulsions- Rome- Urban Commons

*Draft version of the paper published on *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 2017, online first, doi: 10.1111/1468-2427.12513, website: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-2427.12513/full>

1. Squatting in times of austerity: a missing link?

With the worsening of the effects of the current debt and financial crisis and the adoption of austerity measures following the same neoliberal logics that led the global economy to the crisis (e.g. Aalbers, 2013, Peck *et al*, 2013), strong attention has been paid to the analysis of protest movements across the Global North and beyond. *Occupy Wall Street* in the US (e.g. Milkman *et al*, 2014, Pickerill and Krinsky, 2012, Schrader and Wachsmuth, 2012), the *Indignados 15-M* in Spain (e.g. Castañeda, 2012, Flesher Fominaya, 2015, Hughes, 2011) and riots in Greece (e.g. Bratsis, 2010, Mentinis, 2010, Psimitis, 2010) have emerged as prominent examples. In the case of Southern Europe, urban social movements appeared in Spain and Greece have been recognized as leading the way towards radical contention and change. For instance, in a public lecture (2014) urban scholar Margit Mayer has emphasized the importance of the protests in these countries, while arguing that other countries in a similar situation, like Italy, do not express contentious politics towards the neoliberal/austerity order. This is in line with the argumentation of several scholars, including Zamponi who has argued that “Italians don’t occupy” (2012).

Despite the persisting fragmentation of the Italian left, unable to build a unitary movement after the mass mobilization of the 15th October 2011, Italian grassroots’ (social and political) response to crisis and austerity measures cannot be judged as ‘passive’ or ‘lacking’. As a matter of fact, since 2010-2011 the main Italian cities have witnessed a massive re-emergence of squatting as a widespread housing, social and political practice, Rome hosting several of them (Di Felicianantonio, 2016b). Squatting has indeed a strong tradition in Rome and, more generally, in Italy (e.g. Mudu, 2004, 2012); however, as highlighted by Bosi and Zamponi, “at no point in the last three decades had housing occupations reached the scale, level of coordination, or sheer centrality in the public sphere as they have now in the context of the economic crisis” (2015: 375).

Addressing a plurality of claims like the right to (decent) housing and the struggle against real estate speculation, the regenerated Italian squatting movement does not represent an isolated case in the international scene. Countries like Israel (e. g. Schipper, 2015a, 2015b) and Spain (e.g. Di Felicianantonio, 2016a, Romanos, 2014)- characterized by similar housing sectors in terms of high homeownership rate, low rate of rental housing and weak provision of social housing (e.g. Allen *et al*, 2004, Castles and Ferrera, 1996)- have also registered the emergence of large protest movements and initiatives around the housing question. Given the central role of housing and real estate in the current dynamics of capital accumulation at the global scale

through finance (e.g. Aalbers, 2016, Aalbers and Christophers, 2014), these protest movements express the basic contradiction at work under capitalism between housing as a basic right (use value) and its exchange value (see Pattillo, 2013). This is the reason that led several scholars (e.g. Marcuse, 2009a, 2009b, Peck, 2012) to recognize the potentially disruptive character of protest movements around housing and real estate. On the same time, literature on squatting has proliferated in recent years, although mostly focused on emphasizing the autonomous urban social movement character of squatting initiatives (e.g. Martinez, 2013, Pruijt, 2013), while the attention to Italy has been mostly devoted to the new wave of 'cultural' squatting initiatives, with abandoned theatres and cinemas occupied by precarious cultural workers challenging the neoliberal ideas of culture and 'creativity' (e.g. Mudu, 2014b, Valli, 2015).

Asserting the need to take into account the role played by the current crisis and austerity politics in fostering the re-emergence of squatting initiatives in Rome, the paper is aimed at bridging the literature on squatting as an urban social movement, notably Martinez' holistic approach (2013), with a more political economy-oriented perspective analysing the current stage of 'late neoliberalism'. In doing so, I use the conceptualization of "expulsions" introduced by Saskia Sassen (2014) to account for the progressive dismantling of the Keynesian/Fordist welfare system, showing how the emerging squatting initiatives and spaces in Rome represent the "spaces of the expelled" (*ibid*: 222).

Sassen frames "expulsions" as the systemic logic at work influencing the life of people worldwide that "cut across older forms of differentiation and thereby can generate expulsions across different worlds" (*ibid*). Although primarily based on inequalities and poverty, this process has a more general and symbolic scope, as it refers to "expulsions from life projects and livelihoods, from membership, from the social contract at the center of liberal democracy" (p. 29). It is still under development, in many cases not concerning yet the majority of the population, so it is "not yet fully visible and recognizable" (*ibid*). From the edges of the socio-economic system, the process has started to involve more and more middle-class groups and communities who experience a dramatic contradiction: they "may still be living in their same nice houses, with their losses hidden behind neat facades. Increasingly these households have sold most of their valuables to afford payments, have started to sell their basics, including furniture, and are doubling up with grown-up children" (*ibid*).

The main argument of the paper is that those involved in squatting initiatives in Rome are primarily the "expelled" from the regime of well-being and rights of the former welfare state

in Italy, addressing a plurality of political claims around the urban commons, thus going beyond a “single-demand” (like housing). This way, the drama of the crisis and the severe measures implemented is seen to open new possibilities for the proliferation of alternative and challenging political experiments. The choice to frame the return of squatting through a political economy category is aimed at showing how *structural* socio-economic processes determined by capitalist accumulation do not represent merely the contexts in which social movements’ action is deployed, but they shape the configuration of social movements, their mottos and practices (e.g. Mayer, 2009, 2013).

To better frame the argument, the paper focuses on *Communia*, a squatting initiative located in the neighbourhood of San Lorenzo, traditionally leftist and working-class, but experiencing privatizations and strong increase of rent values because of its central location. The multiplicity of autonomous initiatives characterizing the neighbourhood makes it a main example of the tensions between the dynamics of rent capital and grassroots’ mobilization. What I argue in the paper is therefore that *Communia* represents a *space of the expelled reclaiming the urban commons*: the “expelled” from the Italian welfare regime and the life aspirations they grew up with re-appropriate urban space destined to speculation and use it to establish decommodified social (and economic¹) relations, thus affirming the right of people to decide over the destination of spaces in the neighbourhoods and cities they live in. The analysis of *Communia* reveals how claiming the urban commons against the logics of privatization and speculation of capital cannot be separated from the practice of commoning: people come together and put their everyday life in common, sharing knowledge, skills and time, thus new (material and immaterial) commons are continuously recreated.

Before presenting the structure of the article, two considerations are needed to strengthen its analytical rigor. The first concerns the definition of “squatting initiatives”; in the text I only refer to collective initiatives addressing a public political claim on multiple issues, beyond the challenge to private property rights. Despite recognizing the importance of individual/households’ informal initiatives concerning land and buildings occupation for the urban geography of the city (e.g. Cellamare 2010, Martinelli, 1985), they are not part of the analytical perspective of this article.

¹ The focus of the paper concerns the early months of *Communia* (April-August 2013), when the implemented activities concerned mostly social reproduction (food, housing, sociability, cultural activities, and so forth). However more recently *Communia* has directly engaged with economic production, hosting a small laboratory for clothes manufacturing managed by a group of foreign migrants (*Karalò*); clothes are sold through informal and diverse channels. Moreover *Communia* is part of a national network (*Fuori Mercato*) of different initiatives that produce and distribute several products (e.g. tomato sauce, limoncello) through alternative networks based on non-capitalist principles.

The second consideration concerns defining the initiatives under scrutiny as 'new' because they involve different typologies of spaces, new generations (and social profile) of activists and address new claims as respect to the history of the squatting movement in Rome (Di Felicianantonio, 2016b). Defining them as 'new' is not aimed at underestimating the importance of the political legacy of squatting and autonomous politics from the 1970s and the 1980s, concerning both housing and social centers. In fact I consider these initiatives as fully politically, socially, culturally and territorially *embedded*; space and geography matter for political practices and they have strongly influenced the new wave of squatting projects in Rome. Like for other Western countries, in Italy too "the squat represented a place of collective *world-making* – a place to imagine alternative worlds, to express anger and solidarity, to explore new identities and different intimacies, to experience and share new feelings, and to defy authority and live autonomously. Squatting thus offered an opportunity quite literally to build an alternative habitus where the very practice of 'occupation' became the basis for producing a radical urban infrastructure and a different sense of shared dwelling or inhabitation" (Vasudevan, 2015: 324).

The remainder of the paper is made of five sections. In section 2 I give a brief overview of what has been occurring in the Roman squatting scene in the last years, focusing on the research methodology used to enter and analyse the 'field'. Section 3 describes the ongoing process of "expulsions" characterizing Italian political economy. Section 4 connects the debate on "expulsions" with recent contributions on urban commons and the efforts to theorize squatting as an urban social movement, privileging the holistic approach of Martinez (2013). Building on this framework, section 5 analyses the case of Communia, highlighting how i) Martinez' approach offers the possibility to understand the success of the project; and ii) the initiative represents "a space of the expelled" claiming the urban commons, the latter representing both a practice and a goal. Finally in the conclusions I summarize the main argument of the paper, stressing the benefits for future squatting research favoured by adopting a political economy perspective.

2. A multi-method methodology for a fragmented 'field'

Informality has represented a key-feature of Italian economic and social history, including urban planning, with most Southern-central Italian cities having relied largely on self-provided housing to overcome the lack of adequate planning. Rome is undoubtedly part of

this trend, with the urban geography of the city characterized by massive informal settlements (e.g. Berdini, 2010).

In order to respond to the lack of planning and social (and decent) housing provision, the social movements of the 1970s, led by autonomous groups (*Autonomia*), accorded a main priority to the housing question, promoting big occupations campaigns of public buildings, often conflicting with the institutional left represented by the Italian Communist Party (PCI). On the same time, occupied self-managed social centers (*centri sociali occupati autogestiti*, CSOAs) appeared as spaces promoting a multiplicity of activities and claims, providing a fundamental infrastructure to foster political campaigns, notably during the years of the “movement of movements” at the end of the 1990s (e.g. Rucht, 2005). In this respect, Rome has been one of the avant-gardes of Italian autonomous politics, with several social centers animating the political scene of the capital, while the prominence of the ‘housing question’, especially for migrants and refugees (e.g. Agostini, 2011), has fostered the proliferation of occupied houses (e.g. Mudu, 2014a, Sebastianelli, 2009).

However the early 2000s, characterized by economic growth driven by real estate speculation and the will of the City Council led by Walter Veltroni to promote an image of the city as an “international capital of culture”, registered a weakening of the squatting movement in Rome both in terms of housing and social centers. It is since the worsening of the current debt and financial crisis that a new wave of squatting initiatives has appeared. In this respect, the most prominent campaign is represented by the ‘Tsunami Tour’, launched in October 2012 by the three main networks (*Action-Diritti in Movimento*, *Coordinamento di Lotta per la Casa* and *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani*) struggling for the right to housing in the city. It has led so far to the simultaneous squatting of 10 buildings on the date of 6th December 2012, then 14 buildings on the dates of 6th/7th April 2013, 4 more squatted buildings at the beginnings of October 2013 and six more in April 2014.

Moreover, several other autonomous squatting initiatives not directly linked to the ‘Tsunami’ have been launched all around the city, concerning multiple claims, like defending historical buildings from demolition and real estate speculation (e.g. *Cinema America Occupato*, *Communia*²), the occupation of a park under threat of constructions (*Parco Aguzzano*) or a self-managed shelter for helping women victims of violence through the occupation of a

² Although being part of the ‘Tsunami’, Communia has had a marginal role in it since it is not part of any of the three main networks struggling for the right to housing in Rome. For this reason, Communia presents some peculiar characteristics as respect to other initiatives of the ‘Tsunami’ (e.g. decisions are more horizontal, it is more open and easier to access for new people).

municipality-owned building that was used as a sex club with trafficked girls (*Cagne Sciolte*). However one of the most original features of this 'new' wave of squatting projects has concerned the cultural sphere, with a series of former theatres and cinemas being squatted by cultural workers to keep on the activities autonomously, since these places had been shut down because of the cuts to the cultural sector in the name of austerity (e.g. Mudu, 2014b). Several attempts have been made to create a unitary campaign keeping together all these initiatives, the most recent being *Decide Roma* (Rome Decides), previously known as *Roma Comune* (Common Rome) and *Assemblea per il diritto alla città* (Assembly for the right to the city) launched in the summer 2014 to respond to a series of violent evictions promoted by national and local institutions, including courts. In fact since 2013-2014 the national government and the municipality have undertaken a series of repressive measures, including, among others, a new law banning squatters from accessing basic facilities like water and electricity (Di Feliciano and Aalbers, forthcoming). On the contrary, other formal institutions, like the Tenants' Union (*Unione Inquilini*), have publicly supported occupations, seen as the ultimate response by people experiencing dramatic everyday conditions, as shown by the rising of evictions (see next section)³.

In order to analyse and understand such a complex and fragmented 'field', the fieldwork this paper relies on lasted eighteen months, based on an activist/participatory action research (PAR) approach (Kindon *et al*, 2007). Given the highly contended (and illegal) political character of the concerned initiatives, trust is a necessary element to enter the field and access full information. Being recognised as an 'insider' is therefore crucial to gain and keep the trust of other militants. Moreover, given the long-standing and tight connections featuring the different groups, the militants share a strongly embedded social and cultural capital, firstly in terms of language (e.g. Nicholls, 2008). In my case, having been already involved in leftist social movements at the urban level provided me the required social and cultural capital to interact and negotiate with my research co-participants. However it is important to stress that "being/gong native" in these kinds of research processes does not mean abandoning critical analysis and approaches, while challenging the traditional modes of knowledge production, based on the separation between the 'subject' and the 'object' of the research (e.g. Fuller, 1999, Kanuha, 2000). In the case of my research, my positionality as an activist already engaged with both student and queer politics in the city has offered me the

³ The support to occupation as a legitimate political practice is stated already in the presentation of the Union; see the official website: <http://www.unioneinquilini.it/sedi.php>

possibility to 'enter the field' easily, although posing important questions as respect to the boundaries of the 'fieldwork' (e.g. 'When does it start?', 'Where does it end?') and the (fluid) politics of positionality shaping the whole research process (see Di Felicianantonio, 2016c, for a full discussion).

In the case of activist and participatory research, the produced knowledge is the result of a collective process in which the 'informants' are the main co-producers of a legitimate knowledge as well as the researcher is part of the 'field' (the squatting movement in this case). Literature has highlighted several problems raised by such an approach, notably in terms of power, ethics and reflexivity, representation and the tension between marginalization and institutionalization (for a review, see Pain, 2004). In squatting research, this kind of approach has been recently implemented by the work of Squatting Europe Kollektive (SqEK), leading to the publication of two books (2013, 2014), both reversing the presumed distance that should feature social sciences and emphasizing the importance of militant research.

Within such a framework, the methodology developed to analyse the fragmented squatting scene in Rome was made of: i) observant participation/participant observation within two specific squatting initiatives (*Communia*⁴ and *Scuola Hertz*) and the overall squatting movement of the city, taking parts to assemblies, demonstrations, meetings, workshops, and so forth; ii) 76 semi-structured interviews (individual or in group) with squatters of both *Communia* and *Scuola Hertz* and participants to other squatting initiatives; and iii) a questionnaire submitted to the *Communia* squatters aimed at evaluating the social and political profile of the people involved.

3. The progressive "expulsion" of Italian middle classes

To fully understand how the dispositif of expulsions conceptualized by Sassen works both in concrete and symbolic terms in the Italian and Roman context, we should consider the

⁴ Three main reasons drove the choice to focus on *Communia* both in the overall research project and this paper. The first one concerns the subjects involved (mainly students, including several post-graduates, and young precarious, self-employed), i.e. the most dis-advantaged by the configuration of the Italian welfare system. The second reason concerns the way *Communia* denounces and attacks real estate speculation: activists fight private real estate speculation, represented by luxury housing units realized after demolishing a historical site of the neighbourhood (the former city Foundries), this marking a novelty as respect to the historical strategies of the squatting movement in Rome (Di Felicianantonio, 2016b). The last one concerns the diversified set of claims and functions addressed by the initiative, generating multiple positive impacts for urban/neighbourhood life (see section 5).

increasing number of middle class people expelled from their life conditions in combination with the ways entire generations of people currently aged under 40 have seen their life expectations completely erased and reshaped by deteriorating material conditions.

Considering the rising of poverty, a recent study of the Bank of Italy (2014) highlights how more than 21% of people aged between 19 and 34 live under the poverty line, in 2012 the same index being around 18% for people aged between 35-44 and 45-54. These data register a fast-rising increase of poverty especially for people aged 45-54; indeed those living under the poverty line within this group were only 13% in 2008. If we consider the trend of the equivalent income between 1991 and 2012, the study reveals a decrease of the equivalent income for all age classes, except that of people aged more than 64. People aged 19-34 have been the most affected by this decrease, their equivalent income having decreased of around 15% in this period.

If we consider the unemployment rate, we see how the situation has rapidly worsened following the adoption of austerity measures, the rate for people aged over 15 being 7.7% in 2009, increasing to 12.7% in 2014. If we consider the same rate for young people (aged 15-29), we see how the situation is even more difficult: 31.6% in 2014, while it was 15.3% in 2008 (source: National Institute of Statistics). When considering the group of people aged between 15 and 24, the situation appears absolutely dramatic, the unemployment rate being 42.7% in 2014. On the same time, the traditionally low occupation rate (of people aged 15-64) of Italian economy (e.g. Potestio, 2005) has continued to decrease (55.5% in 2013).

The worsening of life conditions highlighted by increasing poverty and unemployment is echoed also by the increase of indebtedness rates. According to the abovementioned study of the Bank of Italy, the average ratio between debt and income is 190% for people aged up to 34 years, 173.1% for those 35-44, 155.7% for the group 45-54, 99.4% for people aged 55-64 and 81.9% for people aged more than 64. This kind of data is not available at the local scale; however for the Roman area we can consider the data about residential evictions to understand the material difficulties to keep a mortgage/rent. In fact in the last years residential evictions approved by the court have increased, reaching their peak in 2009, 2013 and 2014, while those effectively accomplished have reached their peak in 2015 (see table 1). Moreover a report released by Cresme -a neoliberal think tank- in 2009, thus at the beginnings of the worsening of the crisis, already estimated 36600 households as unable to afford the rent in Roman metropolitan area.

In the meanwhile, vacant residential and commercial property buildings continue to proliferate: according to the data of the 2011 National Census, in the province of Rome 41365 residential buildings are completely vacant (10.5% of the total amount)⁵, while according to the Association of Constructions Firms in Rome, 40000 new buildings (both finished and unfinished) are currently unsold⁶.

The resulting situation is of strong inequalities: the 42.5% of Italian households get only 6.5% of national income, while the richest 2.3% get 26.3% (Bank of Italy, 2014). Beyond this material dimension, the dispositif of expulsions has a strong symbolic power, meant as the expulsion of people from the life conditions and societal rights they were expecting for themselves, thus the erasing of aspirations and projects. This dispositif appears to be at work in the Italian and Roman context mainly for two social groups. The first is represented by 'young' generations (people aged under 40) that have been not only progressively expelled from the labour market in terms of unemployment, but have been the first to experience the strong effects of precarization. Most of them are indeed autonomous workers (*"il popolo delle partite IVA"* is one of the most popular slogans to refer to these people) or they have very precarious working contracts, introduced in Italy at the end of the 1990s (the 1997 so called "Pacchetto Treu") and then expanded by the "legge Biagi" (n. 30/2003). In general terms, precarization is associated to the emergence of those forms of 'flexible' and 'atypical' work, used as conceptual categories to differentiate from the standard working contract under Fordism/Keynesianism. In Italy, a precarious subject is usually understood as someone unable to sustain themselves in the mid-term with their wage (Berton *et al*, 2009). This definition takes into account also transfers from the part of the welfare regime to support those temporarily unemployed. Secondly we find international migrants, who arrived in Italy expecting to improve their life conditions and found almost no help in the welfare system, especially in terms of housing (e.g. Sciortino, 2004).

In the context of expulsion from specific expectations and living standards, how do the possibilities to establish an everyday alternative materialize? Which are their forms, means and outcomes? In order to best frame how *Communia* represents a specific response from the part of the "expelled" to claim back the urban commons, we first need a holistic framework that links squatting as an urban social movement with the complexity of the dynamics at work in contemporary political economy.

⁵ Census data are available online: <http://dati-censimentopopolazione.istat.it>

⁶ Source: <http://www.architettitiroma.it/archweb/notizie/13347.aspx>

4. Theorizing squatting as a (coherent) urban social movement under the logics of “expulsions”

As seen in the introduction, Sassen (2014) has conceptualized contemporary neoliberalism as characterized by the “expulsions” of middle classes from a series of rights and living conditions and the progressive dismantling of the Keynesian welfare system established after the 1950s. The key-drivers of this process are foreclosures, poverty and unemployment, these being strengthened by the use of debt repayment and austerity discipline to promote redistribution towards the richest groups (see also Gallino, 2012, Peck, 2012, among the others). So Greece and Spain appear as the immediate examples highlighting the process at work, although Sassen warns not to superficially assume them as “unique cases” (2014: 37), this process being truly *global*. As a matter of fact, it concerns both Western countries experiencing social polarization and the dismantle of the welfare states and Global South/developing countries in which more and people are expelled from the access to land and resources by transnational, financialized corporations.

In terms of transnational political economy, the affirmation of “expulsions” as a main logic of capitalism has coincided with finance becoming the main driver of capitalist accumulation (e.g. Boyer, 2000, Harvey, 1974), its rationality dominating everyday life (e.g. Aalbers, 2008, Allon, 2010, Martin, 2002, Rolnik, 2013). Because particularly attractive as financial assets, real estate and the urban environment have come to play a prominent role in this process (e.g. Christophers, 2011, Haila, 1988, Harvey, 1978); however the tension between the fixity of real estate and land, and the volatility of financial capital amplifies markets’ cycles, determining frequent bubbles and crises (e.g. Gotham, 2009, Harvey, 1974, 1982, Rutland, 2010). The ‘fixed’ character of real estate and land emphasizes the importance of local actors’ strategies to mobilize capital and investments as well as their capacity to negotiate with (and convince) residents: financialization appears therefore as a “lived process” (e.g. Kaika and Ruggiero, 2015, 2016).

Within such a reconfiguration of contemporary capitalism, one of its main ontologies (see Rossi, 2013) is represented by “accumulation by dispossession”, a concept introduced by Harvey (2004, 2005) to account for the longstanding dynamics of capitalist primitive accumulation, including, among the others, “the commodification and privatization of land and the forceful expulsion of peasant populations; the conversion of various forms of property

rights (common, collective, state, etc.) into exclusive private property rights; the suppression of rights to the commons” (2005: 145).

When considering this appropriation of the commons by capitalist forces across Western societies, two main questions need to be addressed to fully understand the political horizon shaped by contentious social movements like squatting in Rome/Italy. Which is the commons to be defended in urban contexts? Which conceptualization of squatting can be better applied as an analytical tool to explain the complexity of ‘late neoliberalism’?

To answer the first question, an increasing number of scholars have pointed at the relational character of the commons in urban contexts/societies: beyond those physical spaces essential to social reproduction that are under the attack of financial institutions because seen as profitable stores of value, the urban commons relies in the set of relations that make possible the reproduction of everyday (social and urban) life. As shown by Chatterton (2010), the commons is not a stable, monolithic entity but a relational one according to time and space, always producing repertoires of resistance. Borrowing from feminist literature on commoning as an everyday practice of care (e.g. Federici, 2010), recent contributions by Bresnihan and Byrne (2015), Huron (2015) and Di Felicianantonio (2016d) have contributed to a deeper understanding of the peculiar character of the urban commons. Concerning social centres in Dublin, Bresnihan and Byrne have stressed the symbolic character of commoning, meant as “the fluid, continuous and relational ways in which the living commons, past and present, are produced. Commons understood as a verb indicates the limitations of understanding the commons as a noun, as a static, physical resource, such as a bounded plot of urban space” (2015: 46). Huron (2015) has widened such a perspective by acknowledging two key-characteristics of the “urban” that make unique the experience of the urban commons. The first one is the saturation of urban spaces leading people to compete or share resources, while the second is the urban being where strangers meet to work together for common goals and objectives. In cities shaped by neoliberal/austerity urbanism, Di Felicianantonio (2016d) has shown how commoning practices represent a response of residents to the precarity of living conditions. However his analysis shows how the character of these practices is not necessarily progressive since they can lead to exclude ‘others’ (like squatters) if the community created around the urban commons perceives a threat to its material condition.

Taken together, these perspectives emphasize the need to defend urban space as an incubator of everyday social relations making possible all the aspects of social reproduction. So the

urban commons emerges as the ultimate goal of urban struggles under 'late neoliberalism', while at the same time (urban) commoning represents a key-practice to challenge the interests of capitalist accumulation driven by rent and finance.

To answer the second question, i.e. reconceptualising squatting in order to fully understand how the re-appropriation of urban spaces represents both a practice of commoning and a political goal, we need holistic perspectives that go beyond rigid classifications.

Because representing a non-homogeneous political practice aimed firstly at fulfilling a basic need, squatting has been fully incorporated in the analyses and conceptualizations of urban social movements only in recent times (e.g. Martinez, 2013, Pickvance, 2003), the literature emphasizing the diverse character of squatting initiatives (e.g. Kallenberg, 2001, on squatting as the realization of an utopian politics; Mudu, 2012 about squatting as the spatial expression of autonomous and anarchist ideals). In fact according to Pruijt, "urban movements are social movements through which citizens attempt to achieve some control over their urban environment. The urban environment comprises the built environment, the social fabric of the city, and the local political process." (2007: 5115). Based on the direct appropriation of vacant land or empty buildings, squatting addresses a variety of claims beyond the material needs of squatters themselves, denouncing housing shortage, land and real estate speculation, and the privatization of the urban environment (and all the spheres of social reproduction), among the others. Building on this perspective, squatting can be defined as "an urban movement in which there is a close connection between a broad range of political activities (meetings, demonstrations, direct actions, campaigning, etc) and a practical development of collective self-management on many dimensions of life. (...) This connection indicates the constitution of a persistent autonomous and radical urban movement with a pragmatic orientation, although some institutional bonds and constraints can also play a significant role in its expansion" (Martinez, 2013: 870).

Despite highlighting squatting' contentious character against neoliberalism, most (geographical, space-oriented) debate has concerned theorizing squatting as a coherent urban social movement with (trans)national links and long-terms roots from the 1970s, emphasizing the tight connections with the alter-globalization movement (e.g. Koopmans, 1995, Martinez, 2007, Mudu, 2004, 2012, Pruijt, 2004). In this respect, both Pruijt (2004, 2013) and Martinez (2013) have recently engaged in producing a sort of taxonomy of urban squatting.

Recognizing the elusiveness of squatting as a political practice, Pruijt has attempted to build “a typology of urban squatting, specifically designed as an alternative for the often-made distinction between squatting as a way of meeting a housing need and squatting as a way of satisfying a need for countercultural and/or political expression” (2013: 20). His comparative framework relies on five main configurations of squatting initiatives: i) deprivation-based squatting, involving poor and working-class people whose only alternative option is homelessness; ii) squatting as an alternative housing strategy, meant as an alternative to (sub)renting, thus involving also middle-class people; iii) entrepreneurial squatting, aimed at providing multiple services, often taking the form of social centres; iv) conservational squatting, aimed at defending the cityscape or the landscape against big regeneration processes; v) political squatting, involving people with anti-systemic, anti-capitalist perspectives. The division traced is quite rigid, indeed “a squatting project can only belong to a single configuration” (p. 22), with every typology featuring specific activists’ goals, belonging class of the squatters, organizational structure, type of buildings, demands, framing, cultural and political embedding, outcomes and specific problems (p. 23). Moreover, in Pruijt’s view every project has a specific (and limited) goal; for instance, entrepreneurial and conservational squatting claim non-housing spaces challenging bureaucratic activities and services (entrepreneurial) or urban transformation plans (conservational).

Although aimed at constructing a similar comparative perspective of squatting initiatives across Europe, Martinez’ recent work (2013) has a more holistic approach; indeed “a political squatting movement may be made up with the combination of different types of squats, squatters and even non-squatters and non-squatted social centres who share similar concerns, support squatting and are prone to use squatting just in case” (p. 879). In his framework, Martinez focuses firstly on the conditions making squatting possible, differentiating among “conditions of possibility” (empty/abandoned properties; urban renewal and restructuring; light or permissive legal framework; connection to other social movements; independent and mass media coverage), “specific favourable conditions” (not too damaged nor too defended properties; slow rhythm of urban regeneration; not too restricted nor repressive legal framework; local and global claims; not too aggressive mass media coverage) and “underlying advantages” (vacant spaces not used for speculative purposes; neighbours as allies; defence of housing rights; multiple goals, alliances and legitimacy; evidence and examples of autonomy). Secondly he focuses on the benefits generated by squatting initiatives not only for the squatters themselves but also for the overall urban

democratic environment. In this respect, different squatting typologies impact on different aspects of urban life generating benefits, e.g. conservational squatting of houses and social centres preserve historical, environmental and social sites, buildings and urban areas, while fighting real estate speculation.

A holistic approach like the one developed by Martinez results useful to understand the tactics and changes also among squatting initiatives emerged with the worsening of the crisis and the adoption of austerity measures, different groups of people working together and addressing a variegated set of claims centred around the re-appropriation of urban space. Scope of the next section is to show how Communia highlights this process, the “expelled” working together to fight speculation and establishing practices of commoning.

5. Communia: a space of the expelled claiming the urban commons

Situated close to the main train station of the city and the main campus of Sapienza University, the neighbourhood of San Lorenzo is par excellence the leftist, autonomous ‘heart’ of the city. During the 1960s and the 1970s, because mostly inhabited by working-classes and because of the closeness to University, it became the privileged venue for autonomous groups and collectives, thus getting to be known as the ‘students’ neighbourhood’. This legacy has persisted over the time, with historical venues of Italian *Autonomia* still active (like the 32 in via dei Volsci), the neighbourhood known for his ‘open’ and ‘tolerant’ environment, often labelled as ‘freaky’. Moreover, the marked character of the neighbourhood is highlighted by the presence of anarchist and autonomous bookshops, ‘red’ football and basketball (including female) teams, a self-managed gym and one of the most influent social centres for the production and spreading of autonomous thought in the whole country (Esc Atelier).

However during the years the central location and the restructuring of the city economy have favoured a rapid increase of land and real estate values in the neighbourhood, reconverted towards a sort of ‘barscape’ for students’ nightlife, while new luxury real estate projects have been developed.

Against this ongoing trend, an abandoned cinema aimed at being renovated as a mega-casino was squatted in 2011 (Nuovo Cinema Palazzo) by a group of militants linked to autonomous groups together with the residents’ neighbourhood committee. The initiative received an extraordinary support, rapidly becoming a well-known space for the promotion of various activities, mostly cultural ones, involving even famous TV and cinema characters, claiming

cultural production as a commons to be defended and supported against the commodification and increased unaffordability for ordinary people. Following Martinez' framing (2013: 881), Nuovo Cinema Palazzo brought rapidly a series of benefits to the neighbourhood, determining its success. Beyond preserving a symbolic building against speculation, Nuovo Cinema Palazzo has hosted talks, solidarity events, artistic shows and workshops, strengthening the connection with other social movements while providing both a free space for meetings and non-commercial social activities and an example of successful initiative, thus recruiting more and more activists. Together with other social organizations, squats and the residents' committee, Nuovo Cinema Palazzo launched soon the "Free Republic of San Lorenzo" (*Libera Repubblica di San Lorenzo*), a campaign claiming for the "self-governance" (*autogoverno*) of citizens concerning the destination of abandoned public spaces in the neighbourhood to fight real estate speculation (Di Felicianantonio, 2016d).

It is in the context of such a vibrant grassroots' mobilization that in 2013, in connection with the 'Tsunami', a group of activists mostly from a common background in students' politics, decided to launch a new squatting initiative, *Communia*, in the neighbourhood because of its closeness to the university. *Communia* consisted first in the occupation of an abandoned warehouse owned by the municipality but without a clear legal entitlement; however the presence of asbestos on the roof raised a concern among the squatters who therefore started to push the municipality to heat-treat the site in order to remove a threat for residents' health. In the meanwhile, *Communia* squatters got in touch with the activists of the Free Republic who proposed them to squat a historical building in the middle of the neighbourhood: the former Bastianelli Foundries, supposed to be protected by a legal order to preserve their historical value, but designated by the owning real estate firm to become a luxury condominium with an underground parking. So by the end of April, the former Bastianelli Foundries were squatted, a wide series of activities immediately launched thanks to the rapid involvement of dozens of new volunteers joining activists to re-habilitate the site, making it become a lively space of encounter for the different users of the neighbourhood. In few months, *Communia* hosted several dozens of events and projects, registering a fast increase in participation to the organization of everyday activities: weekly assemblies became soon attended by around 100 people, while the original group of squatters was made of around 40 people.

Although a detailed account of the evolution of the project goes beyond the possibilities of this paper, we can apply Martinez' categorization (2013) to *Communia* to put into evidence how

the initiative presented all the characteristics that make squatting possible as well as all the benefits associated to different types of squatting. Table 2 summarizes all these characteristics, thus highlights how a project like Communia (taken just as an example of the different initiatives emerged with the 'Tsunami') challenges any rigid classification, since addressing a plurality of claims. In the following sub-sections, we proceed to analyse how such a space subtracted to real estate speculation is made common by the "expelled".

5.1 Communia as a space of the expelled

According to Sassen (2014), the process of "expulsions" works both symbolically and materially. For young generations, the sense of expulsion from an expected life condition, based on the values of studying and working hard, often generates a sense of personal failure and isolation, this condition characterizing also Communia activists. As explained by DGQ⁷:

"we are the betrayed generation, those grown up with the idea of studying and working hard to get a job, even a simple one, (...) now with a degree and a Master I can only access hyper-precarious knowledge jobs, if I go for a common job like shop assistant, they tell me I am over-qualified, but the market has no place for over-skilled people (smiles). (...) What am I offered? Volunteering, contracts on call, yes many of these. (...) I know that I will never be able to access a mortgage by myself, maybe I won't be even able to live alone, in more than 10 years I could never afford to live by myself here in Rome. (...) We are a hopeless generation, most of us do not dream anymore, *tomorrow is the lonely temporal horizon left.*" (personal interview, emphasis added)

Such a kind of narrative highlights the increasing precarization of life conditions for young skilled people in Italy, who cannot find in the job market the 'reward' traditionally associated to the ethics of 'studying and working hard' under Fordism and Keynesianism. Likewise DGQ, several Communia squatters depict themselves as being part of the rising amount of skilled people living in very precarious material conditions. If we consider the results of the questionnaire submitted to Communia activists in September 2013⁸, 41 respondents (63%)

⁷ The vagueness of data about DGQ and other research partners quoted in the prosecution of the text responds to the ethical commitment of guaranteeing full anonymity to all the people who accepted to be directly involved in the research project. All the quotes have been translated from Italian to English by the author.

⁸ With 65 questionnaires returned, the results can be considered reliable since the weekly general assembly was usually attended by a group of 40-80 people in the months of September and October 2013.

define themselves as “very low” (19 respondents, 29,2%) or “low” (22 respondents, 33,8%) income, while only 20 respondents (30,8%) define themselves as “medium income”. In terms of occupation, 31 respondents (47,7%) are students (including PhD)- 17 of them working also part-time or occasionally, 11 are autonomous workers (16,9%), 12 have a temporary/precarious job (18,5%), while 5 have a permanent job (7,7%). On the contrary, if we consider cultural and human capital, 44 respondents have at least a bachelor degree (*laurea triennale*, 67,9%). If we consider that the rate of people with a bachelor degree for the overall Roman metropolitan region is just above 11% (Di Felicianantonio and Salvati, 2015), *Communia* appears to have been squatted by a sort of high-skilled elite embodying the precarization process of young people -the mean age of the respondents being 26,78 years- in the Italian socio-economic system of the last twenty years.

The increasing detachment between material and cultural capital is highlighted also in the words of GGB:

“People would say I come from a middle-class background, my parents are both public employees, they own a house, (...) but they live in a very small town in the South where living is cheap (...) I really cannot perceive myself as middle-class, I am self-employed, barely earning 700-800 euros per month, but no guarantees (...) Sure I have a degree, this was the promise they were making us all the time when we were children: If you will have a degree you won’t have any problem in life! (...) only young people can overturn this situation, we have no future, we have no rights, no access to work (...) so we squat!” (personal interview).

GGB’s self-narrative reveals the increasing contradictions of the Italian middle class: people grown up in low-middle class contexts had the possibility to develop a strong human/cultural capital thanks to the possibilities offered by the welfare state and the socio-political project dominant until the early 1990s. However the rapidly deteriorating conditions of the Italian job market create now a strong conflict in their everyday life: they own a strong immaterial capital (in terms of education, skills and social relation) but are extremely low-income, often working as autonomous, self-employed workers barely able to provide self-sustainment. For those of them who migrated towards a big city like Rome and could not access homeownership through family aid, the everyday conditions are even more difficult because of the high rents. Like GGB, *Communia* squatters embody middle-class born and high-skilled subjects experiencing the expulsion from the life conditions they were expected to live, an experience often leading to solitude, depression and a sense of personal failure. As a response

to this process of isolation and feeling of failure, getting involved in squatting initiatives (at different levels) appears then as an immediate collective and political alternative for the “expelled”. In fact the engagement in a collective project around multiple issues “is like saying ‘come here, there is a alternative to escape this situation that is not drug or depression, but it is collective, political and extremely joyful’ (...) We love to say that we threw our hearts over the obstacles” (DGQ, personal interview).

5.2 Claiming the urban commons while practicing commoning

As discussed in section 4, recent contributions about the possibility to theorize the urban commons point at the relational character of (urban) commoning as a key-practice to challenge the interests of capitalist accumulation driven by rent and finance, while the defence of open and common urban spaces claimed by real estate and financial speculation continues to represent a key-goal for urban movements. Such a dialectical and inclusive dynamics of thinking the urban commons as both a political goal and a practice can be found also in the case of Communia, as revealed by the chosen name, inspired by the famous motto used by Thomas Müntzer “omnia sunt communia” (all the things are held in common).

Likewise Nuovo Cinema Palazzo, Communia is based on residents and activists’ re-appropriation of a historical site destined to real estate speculation, aiming at affirming that urban space is common, a site of encounter and *mixité* that should be kept free and should promote a public culture of socializing and discussion, thus challenging the increasing privatization of space prompted by neoliberal urbanism that is transforming San Lorenzo in a ‘barscape’. To achieve this goal, Communia worked as an open laboratory for anyone. Beyond the weekly assembly aimed at discussing the main issues and taking compelling decisions, there was a weekly meeting for all those who wanted to organize activities, events, and so forth; this is how so many different kinds of events and activities (like clowning workshops, yoga classes, guerrilla gardening, among the others) were set so rapidly. The space was freely accessible everyday until midnight: given its favorable location in the middle of the neighborhood, it soon became an attractor for different kinds of people going there to socialize.

Moreover, Communia activists engaged immediately with strengthening the relations with the residents’ committee and the Free Republic, not just to legitimize their presence in the neighbourhood, but mainly to invest in a collective effort aimed at practicing people

autonomous self-management of urban spaces. This way, they challenge the neoliberal idea of 'participation' in favor of people direct engagement to defend and valorize the "urban" (i.e. their "saturated" neighborhood in which new residents continue to arrive) as a commons, thus addressing a plurality of claims, well beyond the single-demand perspective often associated to squatting.

Communia makes common not just a site preserved from speculation and keeping the historical memory of the neighborhood, but a whole set of everyday relations involving different spheres (culture, politics, ordinary life, sport, education). In this sense, commoning represents an everyday political practice of encountering and engaging with others; as stressed by VTN:

"Fighting for the commons is primarily a relational struggle for me, (...) we fight to escape the isolation of our lives, we live in a system that wants us always feeling responsible for our lives, in which the others are an obstacle, opponents in a competition. (...) Liberating neighborhood spaces from speculation is a way to re-affirm that our lives, our time, our relations, our needs are more important than profit, that *we can imagine new relations*, feeling that *we can trust and count on others*. (...) *For me commoning is repairing and re-imagining this place, discussing with the others, learning from the others, doing with the others*" (personal interview, emphasis added)

This characterization of commoning as an everyday practice echoes Bresnihan and Byrne (2015) analysis of commoning as a relational set of practices that are constructed, undermined and reshaped everyday according to place and the specific people involved. Moreover, what emerges from their account is also a dynamic perspective on the subject involved:

"The ongoing production of the commons multiplies the potential of material resources as well as multiplying the potential of individual capacities. (...) Rather than thinking about this situation in terms of pre-existing individuals with an already determined set of roles and skills, and an array of finite resources at our disposal, we become transformed through our social and material relations, extending ourselves and the world around us in ways we would not have thought possible" (p. 46).

Through these lenses we see how the practice of commoning opens the possibility for the people involved to experiment a different way to engage with others, coming together and cooperating to make the urban a more open and inclusive space.

6. Conclusions

“What are the spaces of the expelled? These are invisible to the standard measures of our modern states and economies. But they should be made conceptually visible. (...) More generally, the spaces of the expelled cry out for conceptual recognition. They are many, they are growing, and they are diversifying. They are conceptually subterranean conditions that need to be brought aboveground. They are, potentially, the new spaces for making- making local economies, new histories, and new modes of membership.” (Sassen, 2014: 222)

Following this crucial question raised by Sassen at the end of her book (2014), in this paper I have tried to show how the Italian grassroots and social movements’ response to crisis and austerity led to a new wave of squatting initiatives. Focusing on the case of *Communia* in the neighbourhood of San Lorenzo as an example of the new wave of initiatives emerged with the ‘Tsunami’ in Rome, I highlighted how the “expelled”, notably young skilled people grown up in low-middle class contexts, are at the centre of such a political process, finding in the occupation of buildings against real estate speculation an alternative to the isolation prompted by the neoliberal model. The choice of *Communia* was not aimed at reducing the social composition of the different initiatives of the ‘Tsunami’ only to young precarious people. As stated in section 3, the category of “expelled” in Italy includes also international migrants; several initiatives of the ‘Tsunami’ are indeed mainly developed by migrants. So the “spaces of the expelled” emerged in Rome are multiple and diversified albeit connected, the analysis of those mostly inhabited by international migrants requiring specific investigation since they call into question the entanglement between the configuration of the welfare system, institutional racism and the tendency by Italian institutions to use ‘emergency’ as a dispositif to regulate bodies and life choices while creating new mechanisms of profit (Di Felicianantonio, 2015). This is the reason why several studies have recently explored the connection between squatting and migration (e.g. Martinez, 2016; Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2016); however more efforts are needed to better understand how international migrants reshape both the conception and the claims around the urban commons.

By building my argument on a political economy category like Sassen's "expulsions", I tried to bridge the literature on squatting, notably the efforts devoted to prove the autonomy and coherence of squatting as an urban social movement, with the main dynamics of finance-led contemporary capitalism, the dismantling of the welfare state being at the core of the neoliberal reason. In this respect, the recent holistic approach developed by Martinez (2013) has resulted particularly fruitful to explain the rapid success and support gained by Communia, while going beyond the "single-demand" perspective that has dominated much squatting literature. As a matter of fact, the case of Communia shows how the main claims addressed concern a plurality of issues regrouped around the concept of urban commons, the aim being to preserve urban space as a free site of encounter and *mixité* against privatization and speculation. At the same time, as an act of re-appropriation by an open community engaged with redefining neighborhood life and politics, Communia represents a practice of urban commoning made by "strangers coming together to cooperate" (Huron, 2015). Conceptualizing Communia as a commoning practice aims at emphasizing its open and contextual character, reshaped on a daily basis according to the specific people involved; this way, social relations become the core of autonomous political intervention. Such an interplay between commons as both a goal and a practice offers the possibility to rethink the meaning of the strategies and mottos of urban social movements under 'late neoliberalism'; claiming the urban commons against the logics of dispossession, isolation and privatization of capitalism cannot be separated from everyday practices of mutual aid and putting life in common leading the reproduction of those spaces subtracted from capital interests.

Reinforcing a political-economy oriented perspective could represent a gainful experience for squatting literature in the future in order to better understand 'how' and 'why' new subjectivities get involved in squatting practices, i.e. which socio-economic factors favour (or limit) the proliferation of these initiatives. In this respect, the "conditions of possibility" and the other underlying factors envisaged by Martinez (2013) should take into account also the hegemonic dispositifs of neoliberalism at work, such as austerity politics, financialization, indebtedness and expulsions. These forces shape social movements' practices and mottos (e.g. Mayer, 2009, 2013) as well as the idea of the 'urban' itself, although cities remain the primary sites for contestation against the driving forces of capital because permitting to create and strength networks and communities (e.g. Nicholls, 2008).

In Rome, thanks to its social, political and territorial embeddedness, squatting has been one of the most prominent forms assumed by the process of political contention and rupture, with

the different initiatives creating an “autonomous city” (Vasudevan, 2015) that rejects the neoliberal principles of real estate speculation, privatization and isolation. Through these projects, the “expelled” take back the public scene collectively, rejecting the individual responsabilization that the neoliberal order associates to their ‘failure’ in not finding a (good, remunerative) job or not being able to access homeownership.

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Table1. Evictions approved by the court in Roman metropolitan area

Year	Approved evictions	Evictions effectively accomplished
2003	4087	2648
2004	6214	2724
2005	5908	2872
2006	5701	1936
2007	5714	1871
2008	7574	2209
2009	8729	2216
2010	6710	2505
2011	6686	2343
2012	7743	n.a.
2013	8121	2560
2014	8145	2726
2015	7274	3030

Source: Minister of Interiors

Table2. How Communia fits with Martinez' categorization (2013: 872; 881)

Martinez' category	Comunia's characteristics
Conditions of possibility	1) Abandoned property 2) Situated in a neighborhood under urban renewal 3) Long-standing tolerance towards squatting in Rome + owning firm lacked some legal permission to proceed with the speculative project 4) Strongly connected to other social movements (e.g. feminist; students; queer; the 'water' movement) 5) Solid independent media coverage (established independent media in Rome)
Specific favorable conditions	1) Decent conditions of the property + not defended property 2) Slow rhythm of the speculative project + slowness of Italian public administration 3) Embeddedness of squatting initiatives + favorable political institutional conditions (political scandals involving the right-wing city government + support of various elected candidates of the M5S) 4) local and global claims (attention to a plurality of issues including transnational solidarity, e.g. protests in Turkey) 5) not too aggressive mass media coverage
Underlying advantages	1) Vacant space 2) Alliance with the neighborhood (neighborhood committee, autonomous and leftist spaces) 3) Defense of housing rights (claiming the right to decent and affordable housing for students) 4) Multiple goals, alliances and legitimacy (e.g. direct involvement to the Pride demonstration, creating a space for mutual aid, supporting independent and precarious cultural workers) 5) Evidence of autonomy (full self-management of the activities without relying on institutional support)
Impacts	1) Spatial infrastructure: provision of free space for meetings, information, non-commercial leisure, expression and sociability 2) Squatting practice: example of successful squatting, attraction of users, recruitment of activists, growth of legitimacy 3) Culture and politics: organization of talks, solidarity events, connection with social movements, artistic shows, workshops, cheap meals and drinks 4) Urban preservation: preservation of a historical site, embodying struggle against speculators 5) Housing: free access to housing for students (planned) 6) Democratic Participation: horizontal and direct democracy, self-management, non-bureaucratic regulation 7) Urban environment: rehabilitation of a building, sharing resources 8) Social and cultural capital: empowerment to solve own needs, self-help, mutual aid, DIY, care for gender relations, skills to deal with authorities/institutions/media/neighbors

Source: author