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Progressive social movement organizations in post-emergency times

A processual approach to change after Covid-19 in Italy and France

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List of abbreviations

BSPs – *Brigades de solidarité populaire* (Brigades of popular solidarity)

BVE – *Brigate Volontarie per l'emergenza* (Voluntary Emergency Brigades)

DAL – *Droit au logement* (Right to housing)

DSA – Direct Social Action

NT – *Nous Toutes* (All of us)

PSMO – Progressive social movement organization

SMO – Social movement organization

XR – Extinction Rebellion

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Early in 2020, Covid-related pandemic started spreading in Europe from China. The first cases on the European ground were registered in France on 24th January 2020, while Italy followed just a week later. Covid-19 pandemic put the world on hold during 2020 and 2021, deeply shaking daily routines. Despite being a biological agent capable of infecting anyone, it unequally affected peoples' living conditions acting as a magnifying glass of pre-existing social, ethnic, gender and economic inequalities. Contrary to expectations of a halt on collective action, progressive social movements were extremely active in this period. They engaged in solidarity initiatives providing for the needs of the poorest, protested in various forms, both offline and online, in order to denounce the several and interlinked crises that the accompanied the spread of the virus.

Emphasis on the notion of crisis was so relevant that the word 'permacrisis' became popular to define the contemporary age European states are living. Together with its close relative 'policrisis', permacrisis expresses the sense of moving from one unprecedented event to another, bleakly wondering what new horrors could be ahead. It is complex to trace back to the genesis of this crises ridden era. Surely, European democracies confronted a complex set of systemic crises starting from the 2008 economic crisis, passing through the migration crisis, the ecological crisis, the pandemic crisis until the more recent food and energy crisis driven by the war between Russia and Ukraine. The unstopped succession of these events made become volatility, uncertainty and a prolonged sense of emergency the new normal. Moreover, such conditions favoured presentism in policy making, meaning they reduced politics to an activity geared to manage emergencies in the short-term, devoid of its constitutive capacity to plan the future. This occurred in a Europe marked by another deep-seated crisis, the crisis of liberal democracies, which has widened the gap between representative institutions and society since the '90s. Democracies have been said to suffer from a responsibility deficit (della Porta 2015), substantiating in an eroding political trust and in rising populist sentiments which nurtured the emergence of backlash politics. Italy and France have been paramount examples of these dynamics, witnessing a growing consensus towards radical right over the years. This trend led, in 2022, to Italy electing its first radical right government and the Front National in France reaching its highest turnout.

However, as widespread as the narrative on crises has become, so has the conviction that they are not necessary bad, per se, but may in the long-term prove a necessary and beneficial corrective. The very word crisis comes from the Greek *krìsis* which means "judgment, choice" referring to a decisive moment or turning point in a situation. In other words, crises open opportunities for change. They look like Gramscian interregna where "the old is dying and the new cannot be born" (Gramsci 1971:556), introducing debates and reflexivity into a world order that is taken for granted and to which there seems to be no alternative. Covid-19 pandemic has been extensively read under this light. Its sudden out-break, scale and dramatic consequences were seen as opening new horizons of possibility. In particular, having unveiled the blatant limits of capitalist systems and the damages it caused through neoliberal policies and austerity, it was treated as a moment of rupture capable of bringing about alternative possible futures. All over the world, calls to policy change spread under the conviction that, as President Macron himself asserted, "the day after will not be like the day before"[1]. Progressive movements were considered as key agents in this effort. However, scholars cautioned that a fairer post-emergency world was not a deterministic outcome (Pleyers 2020). Indeed, just as they fuel the pressure for progressive change, crises could also be the breeding ground for regressive backlash.

Four years after its out-break, times are ripe for an initial assessment of these post-emergency scenarios. What about the medium-term consequences of the pandemic on social movements? Covid-19 emphasized structural inequalities fuelled collective outrage advancing a general progressive call? This dissertation addresses the pandemic emergency legacies for the future of democracies. It does so by focusing on Italy and France as empirical contexts and taking up a social movement perspective. In particular, it asks whether and how Covid-19 emergency has overall impacted on progressive social movement organizations (PSMOs) in the medium-term. Whereas previous research has mainly studied how movements reacted to the sudden emergency juncture, this work focuses on the *process* of meso-level change *after* it. I am interested in whether and how an emergency juncture influences actors even after its end and how dynamics of change played out overtime. This introductory chapter provides an overview of the dissertation. The next section elaborates more in detail on the research questions and the relevance of the topic. Section 1.2 addresses the argument while section 1.3 takes up the literature contributions. Section 1.4 addresses the analytical framework, 1.5 the empirical focus while the last section concludes with an outline of the dissertation.

[1] https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19

1.1 Research questions and relevance of the topic

The Covid-19 pandemic was a sudden, rare event. From a theoretical point of view, however, it was not a novelty. It was indeed considered as a critical moment, as it triggered a sudden and dramatic emergency which highly disrupted the quotidian. Social movement studies have occasionally addressed moments of emergency including natural disasters (Curato 2020), deep economic recessions (della Porta 2015) and wars (Tarrow 2015). Over recent years, in particular, attention has been extensively devoted to crisis junctures (della Porta 2015; della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Zamponi 2018), emphasizing movements' role in defending and deepening democracy amid such occurrences (della Porta 2020). Although depending on their nature, emergencies and crises tend indeed to present several challenges to democracy. They disrupt accountability - jeopardizing normal democratic functioning - and increase conflict over scarce resources, exacerbating existing inequalities. In a nutshell, such periods tend to threat political and social rights with deteriorating consequences on freedom and equality, the core pillars of democracy (Morlino 2012). Progressive social movements, inherently advocating for these fundamental rights (della Porta and Rucht 1995), play a vital democratic role during such junctures by advocating for an inclusive vision of a just society.

The pandemic period has been no exception to this scenario. Accordingly, since its early days, social movements scholars have started looking at the impact of the pandemic on social movements' agency. The resulting line of scholarship argued for a 'mobilisation against the odds' line of reasoning[2] (Kriesi and Oana 2023). Studies stressed movements' capacity to mobilise despite an unfavourable environment marked by physical constrictions to collective action. Movements mobilised for social justice, demanded more transparency and accountability and overall constructed a frame of the virus that policitized the harsher impact of the virus on the most fragile segments of the population (Black, Chattopadhyay, and Chisholm 2020; Bringel and Pleyers 2022; Gerbaudo Paolo 2020; D. della Porta 2021). It remains unclear, however, how these dynamics played out as the normality came back. In other words, did the pandemic emergency bear a durable impact on movement actors? Despite the recognised importance of Covid-19 for social movements - and for politics and society more broadly - there is still very little research on its medium-term impact. This presents the main research question of this dissertation:

did progressive social movement organization change after the pandemic emergency?

[2] All the contributions to the July 2020 Volume of the Journal Interface, titled "Organizing amidst Covid-19 ", lean toward this argument.

Given my focus on the medium-term effects of the pandemic juncture, I break this question down into two sub-questions:

1. How did they change?
2. Did they return to previous, pre-pandemic conditions? or did the health emergency have a lasting transformative impact?

As per sub-question number 1, I am interested in how change came into being. To answer this question, I embrace a processual approach to change (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001), which means I conceive it as an unfolding process that I am going to study by identifying its constitutive building blocks, mechanisms (Tilly and Tarrow 2007). With regard to question 2, I delve not in change per se but in change *after* an emergency. I am eager to understand whether the pandemic emergency left enduring consequences taking into account its longitudinal unfolding from 2020 to 2023. This choice brings analytical consequences on temporality. Actors' longitudinal change is to be understood as unravelling against a background which was, itself, in motion. Covid-19 pandemic indeed passed from being a sudden, unpredictable event unfolding within a backdrop of perceived normality to a familiar context under control; from an emergency to address via unprecedented freedom restrictions to a gradually established new normality necessitating less and less regulation overtime. The mechanisms identified, hence, will be contextualised accounting for these contextual shifts. In particular, della Porta (2018) called to differentiate between times of continuity and times of change, "normal times" and "intense times". Following this idea, I divide the process of actors' change in three phases: 1) the normal times before the pandemic 2) the intense pandemic times, which I refer to as the "temporality of the emergency" and 3) the progressive deceleration of events signalling the comeback of normalcy, which I refer to as "post-emergency temporality". While I consider phase 1) to be the starting point of the process under investigation and phase 2) has received the most attention in existing literature – with a prevailing focus on contentious dynamics during the emergency, mostly confined to the watershed year of 2020 - phase 3) has remained understudied thus far[3]. With this work, I am keen on gaining a deeper understanding of aftermath of the emergency and of the links between phase 2) and phase 3), asking whether and how what happened during the emergency phase sedimented in actors' post-emergency paths.

[3] I recognize that this may be due to the fact that only a few months have passed since the end of the global pandemic, declared by the World Health Organization in May 2023, and that more research of this nature will likely emerge soon. Arampatzi (2022) and Zamponi (2023) are notable examples in this direction.

The challenge in addressing these questions is that concepts like "normal times", "intense times", "emergency" and "post-emergency" do not represent objective temporal units. Previous literature has underlined that temporal categories matter insofar as they are perceived and socially constructed as such (Basta 2018; Grzymala-Busse 2011; Sewell 1996b; Wagner-Pacifici 2010, 2017). Instead of taking "emergency" and "post-emergency" times as given, this dissertation takes an interpretative approach, which focuses on activists' understanding of these categories. The goal is to explore how participants *made sense of* the pandemic occurrence and of the change of their social movement organization amid its longitudinal unfolding. In other words, I approach these questions on change through the retrospective view of activists, using participant observation, semi-structured interviews and document analysis as methods.

Answering these questions, and doing it via a focus on social movement organizations (SMOs), is crucial for several reasons. First, social movements are a "network of informal interactions between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organizations, engaged in political or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity" (Diani 2000: 165). They are processes sustained by social movement organizations. To understand change in social movements, it is thus imperative to focus on social movement organizations as units of analysis. This is all the more true in the case of Covid-19 pandemic, which literature has extensively looked at as a critical juncture for social movements, assumed to uniformly ignite change. My aim is depart from this somewhat normative reading and put it to test by zooming into movements' components, namely organizations.

Second, as outlined in the introduction, we inhabit a world characterized by recurrent emergencies and crises[4] which deeply alter conditions for social mobilization and democratic political participation. This underscores the significance of not only scrutinizing how movements adapt to these changed environments but also the medium-term consequences thereof. Since we have recently emerged from the pandemic emergency, such an analysis is hence both timely and indispensable. Social movements are indeed a particular type of social process that occurs in the realm of (unconventional) political participation. Knowing how social movement organizations change can tell us more about how crucial actors in the arena of political participation change. Addressing this topic after an emergency of such scale, moreover, can provide insights about the resilience of our democracies. At a more general level, SMOs' transformation is an important topic

[4] At this stage, I am using indifferently the words "crisis" and "emergency". This reflects current praxis in existing literature where reference is alternatively made to pandemic crisis and pandemic emergency – one for all see della Porta (2022). Considerations on the differences of these words and the consequences these differences bring about from an analytical point of view are provided in Chapter 1 of this work.

in itself. The capacity of movements to bring about social change depends indeed to a large extent on whether they are capable to navigate amidst uncertain times.

Third, times of (multiple) crises carry potential for societal transformation. Works on agency during the health emergency commonly underlined the role of movements in this regard. Yet, they pointed at this just as a *possibility*, whose final outcome was rightly left as an open question for future research. This study represents exactly that expected "future research". Delving into meso-level change after Covid-19 enable us indeed to venture into the outcomes of emergency-bounded struggles, gauging whether they turned into mass mobilisations or remained confined occurrences.

Fourth, a focus on progressiveness and precisely on how progressive movement actors changed in accordance with the evolution of the context can inform us on the future of progressive forces more in general. Indeed, as argued by Pleyers (2020), the pandemic was a battlefield. Progressive intellectuals and movements were not the only candidates in shaping the meaning of the crisis and the world that may have come out of it. They had to compete with many other players, including reactionary right-wing movements (ibidem). Although the pandemic-related grievances might have fuelled prospects for a collective outcry for progressive change, the electoral success that right-wing parties have experienced in Europe since the end of the pandemic suggests that the alleged pandemic-driven progressive turn in politics is encountering obstacles along its path. Exploring the post-emergency dynamics among SMOs can provide valuable insights into this aspect of the puzzle.

1.2 Argument

Drawing on rich qualitative evidence, my argument is essentially the following: Covid-19 emergency did have important consequences for progressive social movement organizations (SMOs). It impacted on them both *during* it and *in its post-emergency aftermath*. However, this beyond-emergency impact did not follow a one-size-fits-all formula but was mediated by the synergy between endogenous and exogenous actions, that is to say, between the pandemic contexts and movement organizations (and their mobilizations).

This argument builds on a previous contribution by Donatella della Porta (2022). She found that the Covid-19 juncture altered progressive movements' action repertoire, frames and organizational dimension. Following this, I posit that the pandemic emergency *could be* looked at as a *transformative event*, defined as a "very brief, spatially concentrated and relatively chaotic sequence of action that can have durable, spatially extended and profoundly structural effects" (McAdam and Sewell 2001:102). It is worth noting the conditional nature implied by the use of the verb "could". This is indeed an hypothesis I am to interrogate via empirical analysis with the goal to uncover *how*

the process of change was brought into being. While McAdam and Sewell (2001) originally associated transformative events with moments triggering profound changes in political structures (such as 9/11 or the Montgomery bus boycott), della Porta (2004, 2014) expanded its range of applicability introducing the notion of *eventful protest*. She suggested that actions themselves can be transformative, leading to intensified agency and transformed relations capable of triggering "cognitive, affective, and relational impacts" on collective actors (della Porta 2008). Action as well, in other words, was maintained to be transformative for the movement that carry it out. While the outbreak of an health emergency is certainly not a "protest event", literature referred to Covid-19 pandemic as an intense period of heightened interactions, wherein relational dynamics could create contingent opportunities and resources likely to chain in long-lasting consequences (della Porta, 2020). This has to do with the unprecedented disruptive impact of the health emergency, which was largely looked at as a critical juncture (della Porta 2022), a moment of rupture likely to produce abrupt changes which develop contingently and become path dependent. Building on this, I ask whether intense interactions in non-routine circumstances, such as those brought it by the outbreak of an health emergency, had consequences that pushed actors' medium-term trajectories along unforeseen paths (Roberts 2015). In particular, I expect the emergency to have triggered turning points for actors' trajectories according to their reactions to the pandemic and their pre-emergency conditions. Indeed, the emphasized intense relational dynamics that much literature referred to with regard to agency during an emergency critical juncture refer, precisely, to cases where agency *was* exercised. In other words, they do not tell us nothing on those actors which *decided* not to respond to the pandemic emergency. Different responses to the same circumstance might hence have influenced actors' pathways in different ways. At the same time, emphasizing the uncertainty and contingency of emergency intense times should not overlook the affecting power of pre-emergency actors conditions. I assume that these conditions influenced meso-level responses not only during the emergency but also after it, entering into play when actors found themselves strategizing on the way forward when the perception of the emergency faded.

1.3 Literature contributions

This work fits into in the realm of research on collective action during times of crisis, a field that has flourished in recent years due to recurring crises. While previous studies have primarily focused on exploring changes in collective action during crisis contexts (Bosi and Zamponi, 2015) or in the aftermath of sudden, dramatic events (della Porta et al. 2020; della Porta 2022), this dissertation moves the discussion beyond the short-term emergency times to discuss the medium-term effects of

the outbreak of Covid on progressive social movements' organisations. It also departs from agency-centric action-reaction perspectives, by underling the limits of a look to only positive cases (that is, cases of actors Covid-contingent mobilisation). Instead, I argue for the epistemological value of a meso-level analysis of Covid-19's impact regardless of what actors practically did. More than showing organisations' reaction, I am to show *how* agency came into being and illustrate that, also in cases marked by its absence, other equally significant dynamics – i.e., mechanism – may have been activated by the pandemic, each bearing legacies shaping actors' post-emergency pathways. Arguing for the temporal and dynamic nature of the pandemic event by examining the shifting opportunities and constraints it presented over time, this work innovates existing literature by bridging processual and temporal perspectives in collective action research. The former have traditionally been concerned with how contention phenomena were brought into being (McAdam et al. 2001; Bosi, Demetriou, and Malthaner 2014; Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015); the latter stemmed out of an interest in the temporality of action yet commonly conflating this either into waves of protests (Koopmans 1993) or interaction sequences – geared to produce causal explanations in contention processes, independently of the context (McAdam et al. 2001). In this work, I am to bring these two perspectives into dialogue in that I am to offer a temporally-sensitive account of change processes.

The last addition to the literature follows the analytical approach of this dissertation. Indeed, I suggest that consequences of Covid-19 are to be considered not in isolation but in dynamic interaction with what I refer in the works as "antecedent conditions", that is the pre-emergency characteristics of the organizations I focus on. This is a perspective which is often overlooked since critical junctures (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007a), eventful protests (della porta 2011) or transformative events (Sewell 1996b) are often looked at as if their effects were homogenous for any contentious actor, risking to overlook the specificities of both agents and the contexts they are inserted within. The dynamic, interactive and context-sensitive approach adopted here, instead, places the agency of actors at the forefront. My assumption, indeed, is that actors' transformations did not deterministically emanate from context changes nor from individual behaviour per se. Instead, changes following an emergency were dynamically shaped at the meso-level through the interplay between exogenous factors (the pandemic) and endogenous factors (actors' own characteristics and their mobilizations). Hence, I depart from existing research because more than uncovering actors' reactions to the pandemic, I am intrigued by whether and to what extent those contingent choices influenced movements medium-term pathways.

1.4 Analytical framework

This work draws upon a mechanism-based approach to change. Change is conceived as an unfolding process whose I aim to identify the constitutive steps, mechanisms. To this purpose, I distinguish into relational, cognitive, environmental and emotional mechanisms. The first three come from McAdam et al. (2001). The latter is an introduction of mine. On the one hand, in line with my interest on change amidst Covid-19-ridden times, I expect indeed that the outbreak of the pandemic triggered modifications at the level of environment, relations, cognition and emotions which influenced actors' transformation overtime. On the other, I argue that modifications in these elements did not exhaust all the forces the play. In face of a global health emergency, emotions likely played a central role. Literature on wars and environmental catastrophes indeed demonstrated that major disasters fuel a series of feelings, including fear and selfishness, which do not facilitate aggregation, but also solidarity, compassion and union stemming from the awareness of sharing a same destiny (Curato 2020). The pandemic itself stimulated fear of others but also fuelled a recreated sense of community and of collective belonging which worked as an engine for activism. While some of these emotions might have been very ephemeral and contingent to the early lockdown times, other might persist as durable affects influencing collective pathways of change. How mechanisms came to emerge, their combination and the relative salience of each of them in constituting actors' change - assuming that these do not sum up the entirety of the generative forces at play - are the core of my empirical chapters.

Since I am concerned with whether Covid-19 was a transformative for contentious politics, I argue that it was the case in two ways. First, during the temporality of emergency, intensification of time, freedom restrictions and suddenly exacerbated needs had an impact on actors by triggering *adjustments,* a mechanism indicating short-term modifications at the level of repertoire of action and/or organization necessary to face a suddenly transformed context. Second, the emergency had consequences on actors even after its end. Some of the changes that were put in place during the intense emergency times were there to stay and stabilised into permanent features of the actors triggering the mechanism *sedimentation*. But the post-emergency may also have triggered mechanisms that hindered sedimentation, prompting instead actors to dismiss adjustments and to come back to pre-emergency practices. I refer to this dynamic by the mechanism *re-equilibration*. Finally, the comeback of normal times may have opened for a third scenario, that of *renovation*, which indicates actors changing in the post-emergency relative to a certain dimension in ways which are different from both pre-emergency times and emergency-times. The idea is that post-

emergency times can produce hence a series of mechanisms that continue to transform, for example, actors' repertoire or organizing in ways that are different from those during intense times.
In term of the dimension of change, given the inductive approach on change and the potentially open-ended nature of the actors' features subject to transformation, I choose to group them into two dimensions:

I. *organizational level*: it captures the changes at organizational level, including organization, strategy, goals and focus of action.
II. *collective identity level*: capturing changes at the level of collective identity

These levels allow me to discipline otherwise likely disparate evidence on change by accounting for what the two main sets of factors explaining movements emergence. Indeed, distinction into an instrumental and a symbolic level represents an attempt for a middle ground between more structural and cultural approaches that have distinguished the study of social movements overtime (Giugni 1998). The two levels are indeed separated for analytical practicality but they are complementary and mutually impactful (e.g. the creation of a new network as an organizational, post-emergency change may be the result of a shift in collective identity).

1.5 Empirical focus

The thesis is based on the comparison of a set of progressive social movement organisations belonging to the social movement milieus of the city of Paris and Milan. The national contexts, Italy and France, were chosen per a set of similarities and differences. Similarities regard the pandemic impact and overall policy response as well as recent changes in the political landscape. Both countries suffer from a long-standing political distrust and recently underwent a reshuffling of the party system competition, although with a different eventual outcome. In France, this led to the victory of the centrist Macron in 2017 though with an ever rising radical right, while in Italy it led to the success of populist forces, these first embodied by the Five Star movement and then by the electoral uptake of the radical right with Brothers of Italy in 2022. Differences also pertain the social movement landscape, very active and more prone to converge around centre of gravity issues in France, more scattered and issue-focused in Italy. Notably, France was in the middle of a cycle of contention against the plan for the pension reform when the pandemic out-broke while Italy was in the early stages of the national diffusion of the Sardines movement against right-wing backlash.

Against these contexts, the analysis centres around the social movement scene of the city of Milan and Paris. The two cities differ per population and size – with Paris smaller though more populated than Milan. However, they commonly have left-wing administrations, they are two large metropolitan cities, both economic drives of their countries and with a very rich social movement scene. Over the pandemic course, the relevance of the local level in crisis management was different in the two cases as a consequence of the varying degree of centralisation, greater in France than in Italy. In particular, the decentralisation of the Italian health system placed regions at the frontline of the policy response to the crisis. Consequently, regional administrations became focal points for protest in regions hardest hit by Covid-19. Italy, being the first country after China to be hit by the virus, witnessed a rapid spread and significant casualties, with Northern regions experiencing a particular lethal impact. The region Lombardy, governed by a centre-right administration, was the first to implement quarantine measures and suffered the highest casualty rate in Italy. Milan, its regional capital, emerged as one of the epicentres of the pandemic. However, it was also the city where a grassroots response emerged during the early months of the crisis to provide support to the affected population with the creation of the Emergency Voluntary Brigades. This grassroots organization became a model for replication in other national and international contexts among which Paris, in which the Popular Solidarity Brigades were created following the Milanese example. Milan and Paris represent hence two examples of urban environments where social movements have been active in the context of a very harsh impact of the pandemic. This however happened to varying extents according to the organization under scrutiny. This thesis allows to appreciate how different organizations' crisis responses, in combination with their peculiar pre-pandemic characteristics, yielded different post-emergency transformation trajectories.

1.6 Plan of the dissertation

The first part of the dissertation is devoted to laying out the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research.

Chapter 2 develops the analytical framework of the thesis. After locating this work within the theoretical reflection on social movements during times of crisis as well as addressing the gaps in what we currently know about activism in Covid-19 times, the chapter argues for a temporal and iterative approach to social movement change, sensitive to the shift in temporalities that the unfolding of the pandemic entailed. It then details the mechanism-based approach adopted in the thesis for the study of the process of change.

Chapter 3 deals with the methodological structure of the dissertation. Notably, it presents the methods of investigation, the research design (explaining the logic behind case selection), the data sources and collection process, as well as some ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 locates the empirical analysis in the context of Italy and France. Its aim is to clarify why the two countries are meaningful for the analysis of progressive social movement organizations' change. This is done by comparing the two contexts across a series of structural and contingent dimensions including the political opportunity structure, the social movement landscape, pandemic policy management and overall impact on politics and society.

Chapter 5 lays the foundation for the analysis by introducing the case studies at the initial stage (point 0) of the change process. It delineates the antecedent, pre-pandemic conditions of these case studies, emphasizing identity and organizational dimensions. Furthermore, it zooms in on the specific challenges these organizations were grappling with just before the outbreak of the pandemic. These characteristics are crucial because, as per my argument, SMOs' pathways of post-emergency change were interactively influenced also by the conditions that actor-specific conditions which preceded the emergency.

In the second part of the dissertation, the empirical analysis is developed. *Chapter 6* and *Chapter 7* retrace the processes of transformation of SMOs in Milan and Paris, respectively. Each chapter presents the empirical evidence from the single case, detailing the concatenation of mechanisms underpinning change process. Cases are clustered together per similar combination of similar mechanisms and, hence, per type of pattern sustaining the process of change.

Lastly, *Chapter 8* compares and discusses the processes of change across cases in Milan and Paris, in the intent of developing a more general theoretical perspective. The empirical findings of the research are located within the broader contribution of the thesis to the literature and put in relation with contemporary debates on critical junctures and their effects. The limitations of the study are highlighted, and possible avenues for future research are suggested.

CHAPTER 2

Studying social movements change in a post-emergency world

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides the theoretical and analytical rooting of this research. My focus on the study of social movement organizations' change after Covid-19 pandemic necessitates clarifications on conceptual definitions as well as to make explicit the ratio behind the construction of my analytical framework. What kind of event is a global pandemic? How did its occurrence impact on environmental opportunities and constraints for agency? How shall meso-level change be approached? These are some of the questions I will address in this chapter.

First, sections 2.2 situates the topic of this research within the broader strand of literature on collective action in times of crisis. This reflects my intention to move away from the exceptionality aura surrounding the pandemic event to show, instead, how it can be understood in line with a series of crises that have unfolded since 2008. Sub-section 2.2.1 delves into why emergency times are a threat to democracy, while in sub-section 2.2.2 I delineate the specific role progressive social movements may have in such dramatic circumstances before zooming how dynamics of collective action played out during the Covid-19 pandemic (2.2.3).

In Section 2.3, I elaborate on the existing gaps in the literature on social movements during the pandemic. Then, in 2.3.1, I push the reasoning forward by arguing that pandemic impact is currently treated as a black box, meaning it is understood as a critical juncture whose impact has been homogenous for progressive social movements, treating the latter as a unified social processes, hence overlooking to analytically distinguish them from the organizations they are composed of. I argue that this current interpretation prevents a fine-grained appreciation of the role of the pandemic in influencing post-emergency social movement organizations' change. In Section 2.4, hence, I contend that it is timely to zoom in at the level of specific organizations and to interrogate critical-juncture centric interpretations by unravelling *what happened* inside the black box, that is *what triggered* social movement organizations reactions to the pandemic and how these reactions subsequently shaped actors' trajectories of medium-term change. In order to delve into the black-box, I propose three ways forward. First, in sub-section 2.4.1, I call for a more sensitive approach to the temporal dimension embedded in the pandemic event and, accordingly, I distinguish between a temporality of the emergency and a temporality of post-emergency. I argue that the transition from the former to the latter brought about changes in opportunities and constraints for actors which

ultimately influenced their change trajectories. To understand how these dynamics played out, I understand change as a process, i.e. I consider it as a temporal, dynamic and interactive phenomenon. Sub-Section 2.4.2 precisely elucidates what a processual approach is and what it analytically entails. Subsections 2.4.3 and 2.4.4 delve into the analytical framework by focusing on the choice to address the process of change by disentangling its constitutive building blocks, mechanisms. I also lay out some hypotheses in terms of the mechanisms which may have occurred during the overall course of the pandemic, paying particular attention to how actors' response to the emergency may have influenced their post-emergency trajectories. Section 2.5 concludes the chapter.

2.2 The outbreak of a pandemic emergency: new emergency, old dilemmas

"Pandemic crisis" is an expression that generally denotes the period of health, social and economic hardship associated with the spread of SARS-CoV-2 virus – which causes the disease known as Covid-19 - all over the world. Since March 2020, the expression has been widely used in and beyond academia and most people have at least a straightforward, intuitive idea of what is means. As rare and unique as the historical event was – occurring one hundred years after the Spanish flu – the new coronavirus has been theoretically assimilated to an *emergency* like wars (Tarrow 2015), natural disasters (Curato 2020) and deep economic recessions (della Porta 2015). Social science research has hence built on knowledge accumulated on those class of events to single out the major stakes and possible effects of Covid-19 pandemic in a wide spectrum of domains. Since it would not be possible to review all of them, I will focus below on two branches that specifically addressed the pandemic-induced emergency shedding light on its consequences for democracies: the quality of democracy literature and the field of social movement studies. The first focused on the interactions between the "health" of a democracy, captured via some key democratic qualities, and emergencies. Its review is functional to understand how the emergency and its management challenged democratic qualities via an analysis of its influence on basic civil, political and social rights. Progressive social movements have always been a driving force in the struggle for the expansion of citizens' rights (della Porta 2013), whose enjoyment is neither a consolidated trend nor it is uniform across various social, gender, generational and ethnic groups (della Porta 2017). Crises such as a severe pandemic can both undermine existing rights and propel certain issues into the forefront of public debate and eventual policy formulation. The second branch of literature zooms in into the specific challenges and opportunities emergency-class-of-events pose to contentious politics,

responding to the questions of how collective action changes in times of emergency (della Porta 2017).

2.2.1 Democracies and emergencies

In classic democratic theory, the quality of democracy is assumed to stem from a combination of formal and substantive dimensions. The form relates to the democratic method (Bobbio 1987), the rules of the game that ensure the minimum standards of democratic functioning (Morlino 2012). The possibility to voice dissent, to choose among political alternatives, to hold representatives accountable from an electoral and interinstitutional standpoint and to be protected by the rule of law are all procedural features signalling a quality democracy. Despite crucial, these methodological dimensions are not enough inasmuch as substantive aspects concur for a full democratic structure. To this regard, freedom and equality, expressed on the one hand in political and civic rights, and, on the other, in social rights, have long been appointed as democracies' contents (Dahl 1986; Marshall and Bottomore 1992) and most crucial values (Rosanvallon 2013). In light of this background, scholars agreed that policy responses to emergencies alter the combined provision of these democratic qualities.

With regard to the procedural features of democracy, research revolved around the emergency measures taken to address the Covid-19 pandemic. Scholars interrogated the legitimacy of the State of emergency, with positions divided between those who justified it in light of the extraordinary moment (Scheppele 2010; White 2020, 2021), and those who saw them as the groundwork for a far-reaching deterioration of democratic procedures through a jeopardised accountability. With reference to the 2010s European financial crisis, White (2020) noted that "emergency rule is conducted and narrated as the encounter with unfamiliar situations that demand to be handled on their own terms. It is about doing things differently because the situation at hand is different. At least in terms of its own rationale, but also in view of the creations it gives rise to, emergency rule is geared to the singularity of a certain moment" (White 2020:188). In a nutshell, the exceptionality of certain circumstances justifies the adoption of unconventional arrangements ("the creations it gives rise to"). This is the case because emergencies pose problems unprecedented in nature and scale whereby "*necessity* becomes the principle of action" (White 2020: 22). Notably, he also remarks that exceptional situations demand decisions taken in haste, of "last resort, demanded by the situation rather than the outcome of choice and volition" (ibidem). Overall, emergency rule tends to

be informal and unaccountable as exceptional powers break with procedural norms. Centralization of power in the executive branch; exceptional powers breaking with parliamentary procedures; militarization; procedural shortcuts as procedural checks are bypassed due to the need for quick decision-making; bans on demonstrations, with restrictions on freedom of movement, and decreasing transparency are all elements involved in emergency scripts (Scheppele 2010; Innerarity 2021). In the case of Covid-19 pandemic, the crisis has been managed via measures that have dramatically constrained the rights of movement, assembly, expatriation. This has happened to various degrees in different regimes (San, Bastug, and Basli 2021; Bohle et al. 2022; De Munck and Gilette 2022; Schmotz and Tansey 2023) yet the very presence of an emergency has undoubtedly affected the functioning of public institutions at all territorial levels and worldwide. With regard to the substantial dimensions, literature emphasized the imposition of mobility restrictions as a constriction of civic rights, bringing back to the fora the old dilemma between individual freedom and public security (Baldwin 2005).

The dilemma was even taken further as the pandemic did not only lead to a trade-off between common good and individual rights but also between rights, and specifically between the right to health and other forms of social protection that are substantive elements for the satisfaction of essential needs as well as preconditions for individual autonomy and citizenship (Marshall 1992). In fact, as underlined by a large body of scholarship (Pleyers 2020; Delanty 2021; Offe 2021), while the disruption of everyday life was a common experience worldwide during the pandemic, the degree of deprivation related to core social rights such as the right to health, work, housing and education has been unquestionably harder for some segments of the population (Avlijaš 2021). Emergencies indeed magnify pre-existing class, gender, generational and ethnic inequalities revealing the negative long-term effects of weak welfare states (such as in the US, where the differential access to public healthcare had fatal consequences) and progressively underfunded ones, like in the case of European States. While historically characterized by robust and generous welfare provisions, European States faced the pandemic after twenty years of neoliberal cuts to public services. This resulted, among other consequences, in an underfunding of the health sector and in the precarization of its workers' conditions. Consequently, this weakened States' preparedness to address the health emergency, ultimately exacerbating the spread and lethality of the virus (Bifulco and Neri 2022; Ciarini and Neri 2021). In contrast to early days narratives on Covid-19 pandemic as having a levelling effect as the health hazard hits indiscriminately of social status, "the public health crisis in fact laid bare existing inequalities and deepened them further", increasing the cost of the

pandemic in terms of the loss of lives (Azmanova 2021:244). Therefore, the democratic quality literature acts as a compass to understand pandemic politics as a challenge to democracy through a halt on procedural democratic functioning and exacerbated social inequalities (Offe 2021). However, this reading might wrongly convey the idea of the pandemic as a watershed, a moment of sudden rupture and break compared to previous stable, predictable times. While much debate has actually focused on it with expectations varying from immobility (Delanty 2021) to radical change (Vandenberghe and Véran 2021), I suggest to move away from the exceptionality narrative surrounding Covid-19 crisis. Instead, I argue that the pandemic is only the last of a series of crises that have jeopardised social rights since the 2010s, fuelling the response of social movements. In this sense, looking at contentious politics during Covid-19 in light of the already established relationship between crises and movements might steer the direction into our understanding of social movement organizations change beyond the emergency.

2.2.2 Mobilising against the odds? Collective action and emergencies

The role of progressive social movements in emergency times is all the more relevant. Being the quality of democracy both in its formal and substantial aspects at stake, they mobilise in defence of those exact rights that they perceive at risk or more urgently needed than ever. However, this is not something novel, linkable to the presumed 'extraordinariness' of the pandemic event in itself. Even before its onset, the study of collective agency in exceptional periods has been one of the topics at centre of social movement literature. In the recent past, indeed, the conditions for critical mobilization have been shaped by a number of crises, most notably the 2008 Great Recession, the refugee crisis (della Porta 2018) and the climate crisis (Eggert and Giugni 2015) in the context of an overall representative democracy crisis (della Porta 2015; Innerarity 2019). The paradigm of crisis has been the contextual hallmark of agency to the point that literature referred to the sizable mobilisations following the 2008 financial breakdown as "movements of the crisis" (della Porta and Mattoni 2014). With this fortunate label, Della Porta and Mattoni recast existing relationship between movements and crises under a new focus, raising innovative insights about agency development in seemingly unfavourable times. Research on the anti-austerity protests of 2010s, indeed, challenged the '80s view of the "movements of crisis" as weak, reactive and potentially violent movements arising in conditions of deprivation and social distress - as opposed to "movements of affluence", product of an opening of opportunities and the availability of resources (Kerbo 1982). Indeed, waves of indignation of the mid-2010s (Ancelovici, Dufour, and Nez 2016;

della Porta 2015; della Porta and Portos 2020) indeed posed unsettling challenges to structural approaches in the social movement field (McCarthy and Zald 1977) showing that times of deep crisis may provide fertile terrain for social movement outburst (della Porta 2014). Literature addressing social movements in a crisis-ridden Europe (Bailey et al. 2018; Della Porta et al. 2017; della Porta and Parks 2018), in particular, has extensively shed light on movements' role in defending and calling for an expansion of rights over years marked by increasing inequalities, pracarization and declining democratic qualities (Morlino 2012; Therborn 2013; Morlino 2020). The study of mobilisations in the wake of Covid-19 pandemic have been no exception to this lines of enquiry.

Pandemic times have been assimilated to times of deep crisis as opposed to normal times. In particular, Covid-19 crisis has been appointed as an *emergency critical juncture*, characterized by a sudden rupture produced by a catastrophic event – the diffusion of a highly contagious virus – quickly developed into a social, economic and political crises. 'Special', 'extraordinary' and 'critical' are interchangeable adjectives with which literature indicated periods of crisis and strain that "that existing policies and institutions are ill-suited to resolve" (Roberts 2015:65). Social movements are likely to turn these moments of strain to their advantage. They indeed tend to intensify the call for rights, opening spaces for progressive contentiousness. In particular, as emphasized by Johnston (2018), in periods of crisis and rapid transformations "the accepted norms of behaviour, the ones that guide behaviours in every day, institutionalized, normal, quotidian activities don't apply because of the unusual or atypical social contexts: the accepted norms of behaviour, the ones that guide behaviours in everyday, institutionalized, normal, quotidian activities, don't apply because of unusual or atypical social contexts: a catastrophe, a suddenly imposed grievance, a moral shock, a disaster. Social actors turn to each other to make sense of the situation, not to some objective and compelling character of reality". Thus, critical events have the potential to act as moments of ruptures defining new possibilities for transformation and creating pressures for more inclusive reforms (della Porta 2017). Suggestions in this direction can be found in research on wars. Opposition to government may grow during wars because "as states impose higher taxes, armies suffer defeats, and the body bags return from the front, enthusiasm for war dampens. Movements develop in reaction to these costs but also against the constriction of rights that almost always occurs when states go to war" (Tarrow 2015). Such dramatic circumstances can hence spur an enhancement of rights via the development of contention. In the wake of a war, expectations of compensation for the sacrifices endured fuel conflicts "that can be resolved in only

two ways: by becoming a coercion-rich state that subjected people to harsher internal rule or by according privileges that became the sources of citizenship" (Tarrow 2015:12). To avoid ambiguity, I am not arguing for the existence of a deterministic relationship between wars and movements. Rather, the intensification of the pressure for rights after disasters is a possible but not necessary outcome (Tilly 1992).

It is through wars that citizens are mobilized because they develop a greater perception of their rights in times of conflict. As another example, the Spanish flu pandemic at the end of the First World War was the basis for the creation of health services because it dramatically underlined how necessary it was to organize public health facilities (Gerbaudo 2020). Such episodes testify to the strength of engagement in moments of deep crisis.

Although pandemics and wars are different, at conceptual level they can be seen as sharing some similarities. Indeed, both disrupt daily life and trigger discontent, as governments impose restrictions on freedoms and struggle to contain surging inequalities. As emergencies, they both fuel old conflicts and create new ones as new grievances emerge and pre-existing ones are exacerbated to their sharpest extent. Social movements can exploit such situations to mobilize for the defence and expansion of civil, political and social rights. At the same time, the specific balance of threats and opportunities for contentious politics in extraordinary moments is related to the characteristics of the specific circumstance that triggered the emergency. Below, I thus delve into the scenario ushered in by the Covid-19 pandemic and the collective action born in response.

2.2.3 Collective action and Covid-19 pandemic

Literature agrees that despite the structural barriers it posed to collective action, Covid-19 times have been undoubtedly moments of thrust for social movements. A burgeoning strand of scholarship emerged with concerns on the specific balance of challenges and opportunities that Covid-19 crisis posed to progressive agency (della Porta 2022; della Porta 2022; Zajak 2022). In terms of challenges, freedom restrictions and the shrinking space for collective action due to physical distance made the typical forms of protests impossible to carry out. The drastic increase in the material needs of a growing part of the population along with enhanced inequalities, moreover, affected the very social basis of mobilization. This holds true also for activists themselves, who had to grapple with their own grievances, loss of income, or threat of unemployment, thereby focusing their resources more toward their survival. All of this forcibly complicated mobilization prospects of already marginalized groups. Hope, which stimulates collective action, was difficult to sustain

while spreading fear discouraged it. Strengthening of powerful economic interests, increase in repression, centralization of political power as well as the development of exclusive identities based on fear – with stigmatization of groups such as immigrants – have all been indicated as relevant challenges for progressive social movements (D della Porta 2021). Regarding this latter aspect, several studies provided evidence for the spiralling of discrimination and devaluation of different groups including racism against the Asians – as a response to the depiction of the virus as a "Chinese threat" – (Gover, Harper, and Langton 2020) Black and Roma people (Matache and Bhabha 2020).

As for opportunities for contentious politics, research showed that the growth in grievances fuelled conflicts over scarce resources and intensified both the collective demands for rights and the perception of previous arrangements failures, paving the way for the search of alternatives. In particular, movements invested in knowledge building with the aim of spreading a different vision of the situation and its possible solution. The environmental movement presented climate change and the pandemic as interlinked challenges. Fridays for Future launched the programme 'Back to the future' which discussed a socially equitable and environmentally just response to the pandemic. Along the same line, feminist collectives have circulated ideas for a radical transformation centred around care (Paulson 2020). They denounced the pandemic as fuelled by a neoliberal model "rooted in the celebration of the market and competition, in individual responsibilities in adapting to risk" (Non Una di Meno 2020:110) to which they opposed several different proposals such as 'Feminist degrowth: reflections on Covid-19 and the politics of social reproduction' and 'Collaborative feminist degrowth: pandemic as opening for a care-full radical trasnformation' (Paulson 2020). In what Beissinger defined as intense times (2002), the weakness of dominant paradigms are brought to light opening discursive opportunities (Koopmans and Statham 1999) for radical change. Faced with the manifest shortcomings of the State and the market, social movements can hence seize opportunities for innovation that open up in moments of uncertainty to put forward alternative futures. Challenged by this trade-off, they adapted to the moment of transformation triggered by the pandemic to turn it to their advantage by spreading new norms (Turner 1996), defining new paths of progressive change and mobilising in defence of those rights that they perceive to be at risk – especially social rights, brought back in their salience by the glaring inequalities the pandemic and its consequences made all the more evident. How to do it? Of course, the pandemic challenged progressive movement actors to adapt to new conditions pushing them to develop alternative practices and new ideas in order to address the emergency. For the concern of this dissertation, adaptation can be looked as a first instance of meso-level change.

The dimensions in which adaptation took place, namely, where it was visible, have been at the centre of a recent work by della Porta (2022). Systemizing thus far scattered research on different geographical contexts, she singled out the repertoire of action, organizational networks and collective frames as three domains in which social movement *changed* due to the impact of Covid-19. Looking at some of them, without claiming to be exhaustive - I refer indeed to the just-mentioned book for further details - can further the understanding of adaptation dynamics in emergency times. As far as the repertoire of contention is concerned, movements combined both visible and less visible forms of action. Among the former, street protests have been adapted yet not abandoned as forms of contention, often bridging online – which served as a substitute for the squares – and offline forms of collective actions according to the evolution of restrictions. Examples include performances staged from balconies, online rent strikes (Massarenti 2020), labour protests by workers in least protected sectors, especially health workers and gig economy workers demanding protective equipment and an overall improvement in working consitions (Martinez 2020; Tassinari, Chesta, and Cini 2020). Socially distanced rallies intensified as the restrictions were softened, with the Black Lives matter protests against police violence and racism being a particular prominent example in this regard (Beaman et al. 2023). Less visible forms of actions included grassroots solidarity initiatives and mutual aid groups providing for the needs of the most vulnerable from the bottom-up. These built on the remobilization of existing networks activated to address previous crises, especially the effects of the Great Recession (Bosi and Zamponi 2015; Kousis 2017), and on new flourished ones at more proximate community-level in a wide variety of countries (Sitrin and Sembrar 2020) including the UK (Chevée 2021), Canada (Wood 2020), Brazil (Abers, Rossi, and von Bülow 2021) and Germany (Fiedlschuster and Reichle 2020). At organizational level, alliance-building developed around the construction of campaigns on shared concerns and in order to combine complementary resource to provide solutions for pressing problems. Moreover, contentious politics in emergency times led grassroots groups to interact with already existing ones, with an ensuing cross-fertilization of practices and organizational models (Black et al. 2020). Framing was all the more crucial as well in adaptation processes. Research noted a frame extension from the health crisis to other crises in order to politicise fast developing dramatic events and present a broader narrative of the pandemic crisis. This has been evident in multiple contention fields, from environmental movements presenting climate change and the pandemic as interlinked challenges (Thompson 2020; Sorce and Dumitrica 2021; Chen et al. 2022) to women's movements connecting the pandemic with care and reproduction (Non Una di Meno

2020). As importantly pointed out by Zajak (2022), social movements do not simply react to crisis situations but they "creatively shape and construct agency and new ideas about what to do for example by naming and framing the problems and what can be done about them". Scholars have drawn attention to the role of progressive movements as players in the battle over the societal interpretation of the crisis (Pleyers 2020). Early research indeed commonly emphasized the capacity of social movement organisations to intervene in the Covid interregnum, where, in Gramscian terms, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born". Movements have a pivotal role in shaping the dominant meaning of the crisis, by opening new horizons for alternative futures and demanding for a post pandemic world radically different from the pre-pandemic status quo. Overall, while in authoritarian countries protests on the left-wing side of the political spectrum have contested governments' instrumental use of the health crisis to centralize power (Monshipouri and Heiran-Nia 2023), in democratic contexts they have mainly addressed social rights.

2.3 Literature gaps

These different contributions are certainly valuable because they give a prompt account of the landscape of contentiousness in pandemic times. However, they present a series of shortcomings. First, they hold a somewhat short-term perspective on social movements during the pandemic. Most of the literature, indeed, did not take into consideration medium-term dynamics of change. If at all, these works offer a perspective on change in terms of the ways in which collective actors adapted to the first peak of the health emergency, with an analysis bound to the first lockdown, roughly around March 2020. The recent book by della Porta (2022) as well, despite covering a longer timeframe - March-December 2020 - remains confined to the first pandemic year and, more importantly, it does not have a dynamic take on actors' agency evolution overtime. This leaves us ill-equipped with understanding how movements changed beyond the contingency of the emergency – although this is mainly due to the fact that only few months have gone by, and more research will presumably come soon.

The second gap in current literature on the pandemic and social movements regards the treatment of progressive social movements as an homogenous category. That is, in addressing 'progressive social movements' in pandemic times, extant research does not differentiate among different movement organizations that support progressive movements. In other words, it focuses on social movements as an homogenous social process (Diani 2000) during the pandemic and not on *movement*

organizations that are involved in such process, with all their differences (Della Porta and Diani 2006). As a consequence, it tends to generalize the effects of such an emergency juncture as if these were homogenous for any contentious actors, regardless of their pre-pandemic specificities, risking to overlook contextual peculiarities and the very agency of the actor themselves. In addressing medium-term change, instead, who the actors are, their endogenous characteristics and how these characteristics dynamically interact with the pandemic-driven context change likely exerted a high influence on actors trajectories of change overtime. For example, consideration should be paid to the fact that not only did progressive SMOs react differently to the pandemic, but some didn't react at all. These latter are not less relevant to consider in an analysis on post-emergency change. On the contrary, their investigation adds comparative depth to the exploration of whether and how different types of collective responses to the emergency connected with different types of post-emergency trajectories.

Third, research on social movements during the pandemic suffers from a somewhat normative take on the pandemic impact. Mirroring the emotional climate of 2020, when the period of deep uncertainty recreated a sense of shared destiny and intensified the debate on broad transformations, works on progressive agency in pandemic times are imbued with sorts of 'optimistic' expectations on the possibility of movements, with their practices and discourses, to function as catalysts of a supposedly radically different post-pandemic world. In fact, many scholars treated the pandemic as an emergency critical juncture (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007), as a moment of sudden rupture able to produce profound changes. This conceptualization was in line with a recent growing interest in periods of great transformations and rapid changes in social movement studies. While in the '70s the resource mobilisation theory (McCarthy and Zald 1977) and, subsequently, the turn to political opportunity structure (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1978) responded to the need to embed social movements in 'normal' politics - moving away from existing definitions of them as routine-breakers, exceptional forms of social behaviour (Smelser 1962) – anti-austerity protests challenged scholars to explain agency in exceptional times – see also the previous section in this regard. Ensuing attempts to understand extraordinary times of deep change have made extensive use at macro-level of the neo-institutionalist concept of critical juncture (Mahoney 2001; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007; Collier and Munck 2017). According to Collier and Munck (2017), a critical juncture is "(1) a major episode of institutional innovation, (2) occurring in distinct ways, (3) and generating an enduring legacy". In contrast to normal periods, critical junctures are periods of "crisis and strain that existing policies and institutions are ill-suited to resolve" and, therefore, different from as-usual

politics, when "institutional continuity can be taken for granted" (Roberts 2015:65). Critical junctures resonate with the idea of incremental changes giving way to abrupt transformations triggered by a sudden event, like a global health emergency. Previous studies recognised moments of rupture as most important in defining new paths as "what is important are the significant breaks where old lines of thought are disrupted, older constellations displaced, and elements, old and new, are regrouped around a different set of premises and themes" (Hall 1980:33). Wagner-Pacifici (2017) has recently pinpointed to the sense of uncertainty in what she called 'rupturing moments', namely eventful occurrences in which "people experience a vertiginous sensation that a new reality or era may be in the making, but it is one that does not yet have a clear shape and trajectory, or determined consequences" (p.1). Under these lenses, transformative or momentous events might ignite and change bouts of collective action producing new directions of change (della Porta 2020). Overall, they provide insights about the power of routine-breaking events to challenge social actors' visions, producing contextual opportunities and resources, to create – or resist – social change.

In the case at hand, the critical juncture was triggered by the sudden and catastrophic rupture produced by a highly contagious virus which quickly affected every realm of society spiralling into an economic, social and political crisis. Covid-19 was hence viewed as an exceptional period of crisis and rapid transformation where the disruption of everyday accepted norms and behaviours triggered opportunities for social movements to spread new norms and introduce new ethical concerns. In other words, existing research on social movements during the pandemic suggested, in a rather normative way, that the Covid-19 pandemic was a critical juncture for social movements: a significant moment of change that has influenced how social movements operate, organize, and develop. My point, however, is that the actual occurrence of change as an outcome is structurally undetermined yet. Social agency's impact during crisis and its aftermath stands out as a possible but not a necessary outcome. As emphasized by Pleyers, "there is no predetermined way to get out of the pandemic" (2022:396). Institutionalist scholars themselves stressed that critical junctures represent moments of greater possibility for change but that *this is not inevitable*. As stressed by Capoccia and Keelemen (2007:352), some junctures may even result in re-equilibration, that is in the reproduction of the path predating them. Therefore, instead of taking it for granted, I rather opt for a critical scrutiny of prevailing critical-juncture centric interpretations of the pandemic. This means asking: *has the pandemic been a critical juncture for social movement organizations?* Approaching the study of social movement organizations change after the pandemic, and interested in specifically looking at the role that the pandemic had in influencing change, I posit instead that it is necessary, at least, to scrutinize this prevailing conceptualisation. The study of the legacies the

pandemic left behind on social movement actors, in particular, constitutes a litmus test of whether it can rightly be defined as a critical juncture. This dissertation can hence provide timely insights into this still blind spot.

2.3.1 The pandemic impact as black-box

In light of these gaps, it follows another point I would like to draw attention to. As seen, though rooted in structures, critical junctures are open-ended, characterized by high levels of uncertainty (Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). Those are intense moments marked by the reduced availability of time to reflect or deliberate, whereby choice points and contingency (Ermakoff 2015) enhance the capacity of human agency to influence the path of structural change. Having pandemic times been seen exactly under this light, namely as highly porous to change – where, hence, the space for social movements to contribute to social change was heightened – literature has commonly looked at how movements struggled to exploit them, adapting to a suddenly changed context (Pleyers 2020; D della Porta 2021; della Porta 2022a). The basic idea, in other words, was to address actors' agency as the result of a context transformation and as avant-gardes of new paths. However, this type of structural approach - 'structural' in that the focus was on how the change in context affected the forms social movements took – has reduced the macro-meso relationship to a X→Y black box (that is, the attention was merely on identifying correlations between independent variable and outcome instead of explaining the pathway that led to certain choices in emergency times and how these choices were implemented and with which outcomes[5]). The pandemic impact is currently a black box for three main sets of reasons. First, as seen above, existing research addressed the pandemic as a critical juncture that produces change for social movements. Its effects are treated as homogenous, according to a one size fits all formula. This is mainly due to the fact that current literature placed an overall focus on progressive social movements as a whole, disregarding the fact that they are made of many different movement organisations. Any role of Covid-19 as a precipitating occurrence or turning point did not indeed occur in a vacuum but has to be understood as mediated by the capacity of social movement organizations to seize the openings brought by the emergency (Staggenborg 1993). These, in turn, are dependent on actors' pre-pandemic characteristics (Kennet 2017). Hence, the analysis of any medium-term effect of the pandemic on contentious actors, as per my research agenda, requires inserting responses to Covid-19 within the longer-term trajectories of pre-existing social movement organizations. Second, we know from literature that movements

[5] X would then be the independent variable "Covid-19" while Y would be the dependent variable "social movement organization". I acknowledge that formula may evoke a post-positivist approach not in line with this work. However, it was useful to better explain my point.

mobilised despite obstacles posed by emergency times. However, we are left with little clues on *how social movement organizations agency* (or lack of agency) *came into being* - or, as I will argue later in the section, which *mechanisms* have characterised the relationship between the pandemic and specific social actors. Third, the X→Y inferential schema understands social movements' response to Covid-19 only as an adaptive response to a macro-level critical juncture, thus downplaying the role of contingent agency in triggering dynamics with an enduring legacy for actors' themselves. To this regard, della Porta (2020) argued that contentious events themselves can have can have a transformative impact on the movement itself. Though in that work della Porta referred to large protest events, which is not the case in my study, the questions that underlie her reflection are a useful starting point to gauge whether pandemic-related agency has been eventful. In particular, they call for a consideration of the effects that social movement agency had on bottom-up actors, that is whether it produced changes that extend beyond the pandemic itself. This enables me to move away from a study of agency in adaptive terms – as the mechanic product of the structural opening of the political opportunity structure – towards its understanding in generative terms, as potentially able to yield intra-organizational transformations. In this sense, in the framework of the pandemic, I am studying change of movement organizations as a combination of exogenous and endogenous factors, that is to say, as a combination between the pandemic context and the social movement organizations, including their mobilizations (if any, at all) and related effects.

The present research hence departs from how progressive social movements changed in face of Covid – that is where much of existing literature has focused on - to how their re-action to the pandemic– regardless of what it consisted of - affected their subsequent activity and in which respects. These include interrogations on whether some of the adaptations deployed by SMOs during emergency times were exceptional, and, once the phase of emergency was over, activists went back to previous modalities; or, on the contrary, whether they stabilized and became permanently adopted even when the intense pandemic period became less relevant. This means delving into the pandemic black box of the pandemic as a critical juncture to disentangle what happened there – or, as it will be explored below, which *mechanisms* were set in motion – and what, of what happened there, stabilised in the medium-run. Such a research agenda enables me to move beyond a linear one-size fits all outcome of the pandemic on social movement actors that characterised much of the literature so far and to put prevailing interpretations of the pandemic as a critical juncture to test. Specifically, I am able to bring forward an understanding of the specific

ways in which the piling up of contingencies during intense times translated into medium-term legacies and, respectively, to account for the reasons why this did not occur in other cases.

If in the short-run transformations are more porous to contingent choices – as unsettling times make the path of development less structured by external circumstances – the very predisposition to seize the openings brought by a critical juncture are dependent on actors' pre-existing characteristics. Roberts (2017) well condensed this argument with reference to the neoliberal critical juncture in Latin America: "antecedent conditions predisposed cases to experience a critical juncture in particular ways, but they did not determine institutional outcomes; instead, outcomes were shaped by more contingent alignments or configurations of actors during the critical juncture and the strategic choices they made to support or oppose market reforms" (p.13). My hypothesis is therefore that the extent and shape of change in the post-emergency likely did not follow an 'average-based' path but was the product of the interaction between antecedent conditions and contingent choices (among which, the decision to mobilise).

2.4 Opening the pandemic black-box

Above, I have highlighted that current studies rely on a black-box relationship between social movements and the pandemic. That is to say, not only we do not know how the pandemic actually impacted on different organizations that compose the progressive social movement front; we also lack a fine-grained understanding of the broadly understood *actor-specific dynamics* that contributed generating that impact. In order to delve into the pandemic black-box and better disentangle the relationship between social movement organizations and the context, I propose two analytical paths: a greater attention to the temporal embeddedness of the pandemic event and a processual perspective on change.

2.4.1 Inside the pandemic black box: a matter of time

When referring to social movement organizations' medium-term change *after a pandemic*, the context against which actors changed was not static but, itself, in dynamic change across time. I have hence to turn to the temporality that the pandemic brought to the fore and consider how its evolution might have restructured actors' environment overtime. Speaking of temporality means delving into the *social perception* that accompanies the passing of time. For the case of this research, it means raising some relevant questions: which temporalities characterized the pandemic? Was it at all about 'emergency times'? These kinds of interrogations strike as crucial in this

dissertation. Existing literature tends to look univocally to the pandemic as an emergency from a time perspective. I claim that this interpretation tends to reduce the pandemic to a temporal monolith. It is therefore imperative to move past prevailing interpretations that equate Covid-19 pandemic exclusively with an emergency and embrace a more nuanced conceptualisation that accounts for the temporality shift that its three-years' unfolding - from March 2020 to May 2023, when the World Health Organization officially declared its end - necessarily encompassed. In particular, we should 1) distinguish 'emergency times from 'post-emergency times' 2) take into consideration the consequences that the temporal shift from the former to the latter entails for action. My hypothesis is indeed that the ways in which actors mobilize *during* emergency times differs fundamentally from mobilizing *after* it, in, as I would say, a post-emergency temporality. Hence, temporality plays a crucial role in how they relate to the context, adjusting and readjusting strategy and tactics accordingly. Below I sketch out some reasons why this is the case.

The study of temporality has been a long overlooked topic in social movement scholarship, only recently revived (Gillan 2020; Gillan and Edwards 2020). Traditionally, two temporal logics dominated the field: long-term change processes and protest cycles (Tarrow 1998). Similarly concerned with the origins of contention, the two perspectives differed in how deeply to root them. On the one hand, a long-term change perspective payed attention to the cumulative effect of long-run change processes to explain movement activity. As recalled by McAdam and Sewell (2001), the disputes over the causes of the US Civil Rights Movement and the French Revolution - i.e. the collapse of the Southern cotton economy with the ensuing massive migration of black to the North in the former case, and the rise of capitalism and the economic ascendance of the bourgeoisie, in the latter - illustrate well the concern for anchoring insurgency in such a long-run temporal framework. On the other hand, 'cycles' (Tarrow 1998) 'waves' (Koopmans 2004) 'tides' of contention (Beissinger 2002) have been used to demarcate the temporally narrow phase corresponding to the concentration of active mobilization. Undoubtedly, this has been the main temporal perspective scholars of political contention engaged with. However, an exclusive emphasis on these two temporal rhythms leads toward an overly deterministic account of contentious politics whereby protest cycles are the result of long-term change processes. To mitigate this perspective, McAdam and Sewell (ibidem) introduced, among others, the concept of *transformative events.* Transformative events and the notion of 'eventful temporality' more in general (Sewell 1996b, 1996a) present a particular heuristic value for conceptualising pre-post Covid transformations. While for a long time the term was used to signal large-scale overhauls of political structures, such

as regime changes or revolutions, social movement scholars used it to indicate the power of events in catalysing or advancing a protest cycle – i.e. the Montgomery bus boycott in the Civil Right Movements (McAdam 1982). The transformative events perspective, in particular, called for a closer look at events' inherent temporality. Under this light, "events become turning points in structural change, concentrated moments of political and cultural creativity when the logic of historical development is reconfigured by human action" (McAdam and Sewell 2001, p. 102). In contrast to the enhanced *possibility* of transformation signalled by critical junctures, events are occurrences that *do* result in profound political change – e.g. the taking of the Bastille as a transformative event leading to regime change. However, whether an occurrence can be considered as critical or eventful is strictly a matter of empirical research. My aim is exactly to untangle this question with reference the impact of the pandemic on progressive SMOs.

In the case of social movements, contention-related transformative events have been defined as "narrow, spatially circumscribed and chaotic sequence of actions likely to yield profound and long-lasting structuring effects on the fortunes of the mobilization itself" (ibidem). In this sense, they oppose to the predictable, linear and routine progression of normal times a discontinuous and punctuated temporality that hatches the possibility for agency to really impact before inaccessible structures. As eminently remarked by McAdam and Sewell (2001), this possibility exists as such just insofar as *it is constructed* as such. All in all, 'normal times', 'intense times' and "transformative events" – but also 'emergencies' and 'crises' (Coleman 2013) - do not represent objective temporal units but they are socially constructed as such by symbolic interactive processes among social and political actors (Wagner-Pacifici 2010; Basta 2018). Their mere occurrence is not enough to trigger agency; events should be attributed a *collective significance* by potential rebels. Likewise, long-run change processes per se have little power in shaping the likelihood of contentious politics. It is rather the continuous processes of *narration*, *interpretation* and *sense making* of reality leading people to break with institutionalized routines, taken for granted assumptions and to forge new world views, which eventually leads to popular contention. In this framework, the function of events is simply to make these processes of collective sense-making more likely, acting as a transmission channel between structure and agency. They are vehicles of evidence out of which movement adherents construct their shared understanding of the contextual opportunities at every stage of the protest cycle. They distil and express the potential for action by illuminating long-term change processes, signalling systemic vulnerability and convincing participants that times are or are not ripe with opportunities. Eventually, whether processes of

interpretation and social construction lead to acquiescence or voice and, in this latter case, the form this 'voicing' takes, is dependent upon actors' contingent strategizing on the basis of antecedent conditions and available resources. This echoes much with the debate reviewed in the first part of the chapter on the Covid-19-driven possibility to recognise opportunities in "otherwise opaque environments" (McAdam and Sewell, 2001:119). Following this reasoning, the spread of the pandemic has triggered an eventful temporality deemed to have lasting consequences. Eventful times are not just ruptures and breaks after which the course of political action returns to normality. They are not just transformative for collective action due to the challenges they pose *as they* unfold but also for the period of time *that follows*, that is for the durable transformations they lead to. Intense (emergency) times, in other words, may leave a long-term transformative impact. Building on these assumptions, I suggest that two different temporal dynamics entered into play in the period under analysis, 2020-2023: the temporality of the emergency and the temporality of the post-emergency. They both affected actors' interaction with the context and ensuing assessment of the context-specific structural opportunities and challenges. This ultimately influenced their change overtime.

Hence, I move past what I consider to be a reductive understanding of the pandemic, from a time perspective, as an 'emergency'. Instead, I argue that we should attend to the existence of two different temporalities when we speak about emergencies: the temporality of the emergency and the temporality of the post-emergency. The temporality of the emergency accounts for the sudden and unforeseen unfolding of an expected event bringing about exceptional conditions and needs. An emergency is indeed an exceptional temporal context "outside of what is recognised and felt as everyday time" (2016, 2017). Emergencies exacerbate the call for urgent and concrete action and fuel an acceleration of time perception. In these intense times, contention emerges via a quick and dense sequence of contentious interactions. Moreover, in contrast to an eternally self-reproducing present, amidst emergency-driven instability the future's potential to become otherwise is suddenly recuperated (Anderson 2016, 2017). Research on collective action during emergencies has been mostly confined to the field of humanitarian action (Brun 2016; Calhoun 2010; Ticktin 2016; Compton 2020). These studies underlined that emergencies tend to curtail the scope of long-term imagination. In fact, the urgent responses demanded by suddenly deteriorating needs catalyse energies over the short-term with the aim to bring back the situation to normal as soon as possible. Building on these assumptions, I argue that emergency times can be eventful and impact on social movement organizations' transformations. This argument comprises three parts:

1. There are two temporalities that matter, the temporality of the emergency and the temporality of the post-emergency. I consider emergency times as *intense times* while post-emergency times as marked by *progressive normalisation of time*. The outbreak of Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown measures provided the contextual features of the emergency. The gradual loosening of those dispositions and the shift to the coexistence phase with the virus paved the way for what I refer to as 'post-emergency' temporality. When a momentous event like an abrupt health emergency occurs, the perception of time accelerates as its unprecedentedness challenges normalized practices and fuels uncertainty. Decisions have to be taken quickly, in the heat of the moment, as predictability is reduced and routine responses likely to be no longer effective. However, as it progresses, the initially unknown emergency and the related exceptional conditions become familiar. Post-emergency times, hence, are times in which actors see things going back to the pre-emergency situation, although some other emergency measures might still be in place. SMOs expectedly experienced a dynamic of time normalization, characterized by the loosening of the perception of urgency.

2. Emergency times have important repercussions *as they unfold* for the scope of social movement agency. In particular, they lead to a series of meso-level *adjustments* prompted by the necessity to deal with an abruptly changed environment. Presumably, these adjustments are reassessed in the aftermath. The transition to a post-emergency temporality, indeed, marks a change in the context in which actors make their strategic choices.

3. Following the previous point, emergency times may have a transformative impact on SMOs *after* they come to a conclusion. While some of the *adjustments* during contentious episodes may revert in the post-emergency temporality, others may solidify overtime, becoming permanent features of the movement organization.

In saying this, I want to pin down a caveats for the reader. I do not endorse the pursuit of a precise time point between the end of the emergency and the start of the post-emergency. Rather, my aim is to analytically zoom into how, as the pandemic progressed, the variation in temporalities contributed to the shaping and reshaping actors' action field overtime. During emergency times, indeed, events are accelerated (for one, emergencies restrict the amount of time available to find solutions to immediate needs) while, during the post-emergency, they decelerate. It is likely that this

has consequences on activists' perception of time, and that this shift in social perception will also influence their change. At the same time, I caution against a reductionist explanation of medium-term change as a consequence of only a shifting perception of time. With this paragraph, I wanted to emphasize that context changed *also* (but not only) in time. Rather, medium-term change was related to different temporalities but also due to the different events within these temporalities – for their scrutiny in the empirical contexts, See Chapter 4.

2.4.2 Inside the pandemic black-box: a matter of processes

Above, I have singled out the need to delve into the black box of the pandemic as a critical juncture. This not for an ex-ante refusal of this prevalent interpretation in the literature but for the need to untangle *what happened* inside the black box which might have steered the direction toward change or stability. In other words, I am interested in unravelling how post-emergency change *came into being*. To this aim, this thesis rests on a processual approach to change. It follows that I understand SMOs' change as an inherently dynamic and temporal phenomenon. I hereafter turn to explain what a processual approach is and which specific analytical implications this choice has for this thesis.

SMOs unfold over time, changing their forms of action, identities, goals, affected by the transformation of the socio-political setting in which they take place. As part of the flow of history, they "should be subjected to processual analysis" (Bidart, Longo, and Mendez 2013:743). Processual analyses seek to reconstruct meso-level trajectories, how these unfold shaped by strategy, conjuncture and contingency and as situated in their particular historical context, in social time and space. Such an approach contrasts to static or a-temporal perspectives, which presumes petrified entities, independent of the context. At the same time, it eschews the idea of deterministic processes grounded on a linear conception of change – and overall, of causality as a relationship between variables – overtime. It holds, instead, social movement organizations as fluid and constantly in becoming per effect of multiple, context-sensitive and interwoven factors.

Despite prominent today, processual perspectives struggled to gain traction in collective action research, overshadowed until the '70s by the hegemony of structural ahistorical causality (Abbott 1988). Building on the resource mobilization and the political process theories, which laid the foundation to the study of challengers as rational actors *in interaction with* the state and the context's opportunities (McAdam 1982), it was from '90s that processual approaches gained more prominence at different levels of analysis. At micro-level, attention was paid to individuals'

pathways of engagement and disengagement as situated in their social and relational context overtime (McAdam 1986; Snow, Zurcher, and Ekland-Olson 1980). At meso level, scholars investigated how agency was transformed as a result of complex interactions and in response to evolving socio-political contexts. To say it with Koopmans (2004), contention was looked at as a "multi-actor process that cannot be adequately understood by focusing attention on one actor and reducing the others to the role of context variables" (40). Other works unpacked the *diachronic* and *gradual* process leading to the adoption of a certain form of action speaking of "collective actors' pathways" (Bosi and Zamponi 2020), while Jasper (2006; 2015) focused on the strategic interactions in which players engage with one another in arenas. At macro-level, processual approaches inserted the emergence and transformation of actors and repertoires within broader historical processes of social change (Shorter and Tilly 1974; Tilly 1995). Finally, studies on political violence advanced a more comprehensive inter-level approach (Bosi and della Porta 2012; della Porta 1995a).

The common denominator of all these works, irrespective of the level of analysis adopted, is the understanding of collective action phenomena as resulting from a web of complex, iterative interactions.

This understanding has made Crossley (2016) speak of a close link between processual and relational ontologies to the point that recent works pinpointed to 'processual relationism' as a missing bridge between the two (Dépelteau 2018; Selg, Klasche, and Nõgisto 2022). Emerging out of the dissatisfaction with the dichotomy between macro-level and micro-level analysis – as well as with the concern in identifying invariant explanations – relational approaches in collective action research have indeed conceived social movements as comprised by complicated and contingent bundles of interactions among groups, individuals and institutional actors. The basic tenet was that, to flash out trajectories of contentious episodes, social interactions and ties were to be treated as "active sites of creation and change" (McAdam et al. 2001). In other words, social relations were maintained as *unfolding processes* (Diani and McAdam 2003).

The processual, dynamic and iterative understanding of social relations fits well with my effort to go beyond resolute structural explanations without rejecting the idea that macro-level forces can contribute to the emergence of meso-level phenomena. Arguing for meso-level change as a *process* means that collective actors are not monolithic entities punctuated by episodes of transformation but dynamic and fluid, "perpetually becoming, interactively produced and defined by the shifting relationships within specific contexts" (Bosi and Malthaner 2023). With such a conceptualisation, I

move away from the consideration of all collective actors as influenced by the pandemic emergency in the same way. That is, my goal is not to explain change as the outcome of a causal relationship between a structural cause, 'Covid-19 pandemic' and its purported effect, 'actors' behaviour' but as a property of the dynamics that they generate at the level of specific organizations. Gerring (2007) speaks in this regard of the necessity to locate the intermediate *factors* lying between the two. While in this work I do not refer to factors - but, as I will elaborate on below, to mechanisms - this explanatory rationale is very telling for our case. The idea is that "no factor has an explanatory capacity in itself" (Bosi and Zamponi 2020). While important, exogenous and endogenous factors do not shape collective action phenomena *per se* but they are their *interactively determined* constitutive building blocks. It is thus by looking at the interaction of multiple factors in their temporal sequencing that I am able to reconstruct paths of post-emergency change. My research task, hence, is not to pinpoint to correlations among independent variables and outcomes but to reconstruct 1) the steps of a sequence and 2) how these steps interlock with each other to form a pathway (or trajectory), which is to explain social movement organizations' change process. In this sense, change is not simply the product of a process but *a part of it*. Conceiving medium-term change as a process means to see it as interactively produced 'in the making' according to the dynamic *combination* between exogenous factors (the pandemic context) and endogenous factors (social movement organizations and their mobilisations, as detailed further down the section).

Another reason makes processual approaches particularly fitting for this research. Sketching out the complex temporal and interaction-effect contingency-bounded nature of social movements' diachronic unfolding, processual perspectives conceive movement organizations as endowed with "autonomous causal efficacy" (Bosi et al. 2014:3,4). This idea is extremely suitable for the analytical scaffoldings of this thesis. Indeed, it suggests that SMOs evolve not only as shaped by the exogenous context they are inserted in but also by the dynamics that *they themselves generate*. As argued by della Porta (2008), social movement organizations do not just take part in contentious events but contentious events also change social movements. The relevance of structure is hence tempered by an emphasis on the dynamics that movements themselves put in motion. In this sense, structural conditions *do* matter but they have a less-than-determining character. That is, the broader socio-political context in which social movement organizations operate does influence social movement organizations but not in a deterministic way. The idea is that SMOs not only respond or adapt to external conditions but they also have the capacity to shape and influence their environment through action. This type of approach calls attention to the relational processes

generated by choices of actors in dynamic interaction with the context they are inserted within. This perspective reflects my concern in this thesis to restore the primacy of agency and of the creativity of collective actors in research concerning social movements and the pandemic. Their response to the health emergency indeed may have triggered dynamics which, in turn, may have influenced their post-emergency trajectories. In order to operationalize these 'dynamics', a mechanism-based perspective is introduced in the picture.

2.4.3 A mechanism-process approach

The mechanism-based approach can be easily grasped starting from some key definitions. A process is defined as "a sequence of events that describes how things changed overtime" (Pettigrew 1997:338). A processual explanation, hence, is based on the ratio that "we understand the occurrence of events by learning the steps in the process by which they came to happen" (Becker 1998:61). Mechanisms are, precisely, the steps in the process. Used, among others, in studies on political violence (Della Porta and Bosi 1995; Bosi, Demetriou, e Malthaner 2014) and radicalization (Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015), mechanism-based analyses address the explanation of collective action phenomena via the identification of their causal chains. To say that I rely on a mechanism-based approach means not to reduce post-emergency change to its final outcome. Rather, to embrace an investigation strategy that aims to divide it into its constitutive stages, mechanisms. In other words, the focus is not on comparing an actor at time T0 (pre-pandemic) with the same actor at time T1 (post-pandemic) but rather I am to grasp the causal trajectory - and its constitutive steps- that underpins the transition of the actor from time T0 to time T1. The focus of my work is thus on *how* post-emergency transformation came into being (Bosi and Malthaner 2023).

Dynamics of Contention (McAdam et al. 2001) and *Contentious politics* (Tilly and Tarrow 2007) treat mechanisms as "delimited class of events that alter relations among specified sets of elements in identical or closely similar ways over a variety of situations". According to McAdam et al. (2001), attention should be paid to modifications in three sets of elements: 1) the environment, 2) cognition and 3) relations. Accordingly, *cognitive mechanisms* operate through the modification of individual and collective perception; *environmental mechanisms* point to externally generated influences shifting the connections of actors to their environment while *relational mechanisms* alter connections among people, groups and networks. Mechanisms then compound into processes, defined as "regular combinations and sequences of mechanisms that […] that interactively produce some outcome" (Tilly and Tarrow 2007:28). These prescriptions would lead me to identify a limited

class of events that altered connections at the level of the environment, cognition and relations in identical or similar ways, across various cases *during* and *after* an emergency - notably, in the timeframe 2020-2023. The assumption is that varying combinations of these 'classes of events', meaning mechanisms, sustained the process of actors' change throughout the course of the pandemic. At the same time, my analytical effort is not only to single out change generative mechanisms but also to flesh out how each mechanism came into play. To this aim, I build on the research perspective developed by Alimi, Bosi and Demetriu (2012, 2015) according to which each general mechanism can be broken down in a series of constitutive sub-mechanisms. Any given mechanism, they assume, can be generated in different contexts by different combinations of sub-mechanisms, unfolding not necessarily prior to the mechanism but also in synchrony with it. This analytical regression allows me to capture how the same mechanism is constituted in different ways across my units of analysis, organizations.

After having disaggregated a process into its component mechanisms to understand what makes it work, different strategies open to researchers interested in comparisons, like I am. These include but are not limited to a comparison of how the same process works in different contexts as well as an examination of mechanisms patterns, that is whether regular combination of mechanisms coincide so frequently with a same outcome.

My strategy to overcome what otherwise would be unique actor-specific trajectories and facilitate their systematic comparison, is to build on, yet expanding, Alimi et al. (2015). In their study of radicalisation dynamics, these authors conceived four sources of cross-case dissimilarity. First, combination of mechanisms can differ in terms of sequencing and of specific intervening mechanisms. Hence, not all the mechanisms forcibly combine in the same temporal order nor do they operate at all in the entirety of the cases under scrutiny. Second, mechanisms vary across empirical contexts as per constituting sub-mechanisms. Analytical regression to sub-mechanism should not create the expectation that any given mechanism corresponds to a pre-set concatenation of sub-mechanisms. Rather, it serves to flesh out the idea that a given mechanism can be rooted in different sub-mechanisms reflecting the specificities of each actors' condition. Third, they vary in their gravity, that is in the relative prominence each mechanism carries against the other. Initial conditions play here a fundamental role in shaping the sequencing. And fourth, which is a theoretical adding of this research, mechanisms can vary in their salience *across different temporalities*. The multiplicity of temporalities into play, indeed, exerts an influence throughout the whole process. I maintain that it could be the case for a certain mechanism to have been highly

prominent during the period of emergency and then diminished in importance during the transition to the post-emergency phase. This drives to a scenario in which instances of change may have emerged over the course of the emergency, sustained by the salience of certain mechanisms, but may not have made their day to 2023, as the emergency progressively ended. What remains to clarify now is how a mechanism-based analysis plays out in an analysis of change *after* an emergency.

2.4.4 The logic of explanation in a post-emergency context

This dissertation conceptualizes social movement organizations' change as a flow. Its operational scrutiny across sequences of mechanisms and constituting sub-mechanisms, as well as its anchoring to a defined timespan, allow to appreciate the dynamics that have underpinned transformation in a specific historical moment marked by the outbreak and the end of global health emergency. The process I look at is characterized by an initial condition and a constituted processual outcome. First of all, the initial stage is a social movement organization 1) situated in a pre-emergency temporality 2) marked by distinctive *pre-emergency* conditions that I refer to as 'antecedent conditions' – details on them per each case are provided in Chapter 5. The initial conditions of an organization do inform the dynamics of change process, though not in a deterministic manner[6]. The exploration of how actors changed, therefore, must be sensitive to initial conditions. The pandemic context in its longitudinal unfolding was indeed primary a context in which organizations made strategic choices. In particular, they strategized about how to position themselves within in, and, in doing so, they were likely influenced *also* by pre-existing characteristics. What are then the initial conditions that matter? Drawing on social movement studies, I conceptualise these conditions as a blend of *organization-related* and *identity-related* traits. In particular, I draw on and expand the work by Bosi and Zamponi (2020) on the pathways that led different actors to the adoption of the same form of action in times of crisis. In front of a crisis context, they argue, collective actors differ significantly in their adoption of the same form of action according to a mix of "pragmatic calculations (resources and organization) and moral imperatives (previous experiences, identities and ideologies), which change in relation to the context" (Bosi and Zamponi 2020:4). Despite not dealing in this work with actors undertaking the same form of action, I claim that the way social movement organizations changed over the unfolding of the same emergency was shaped - also - by who they were and what they did before the juncture itself. In particular, aspects related to

[6] As it will be clear in the empirical analysis, indeed, differences of initial conditions help us make sense of the variations in the occurrence of mechanisms.

organization and aspects related to the identity entered into play as antecedent conditions. *Organization-related elements* include actors' organizational structure (McCarthy and Zald 1977), strategy (Maney et al. 2012) and repertoire of contention (Tilly 1986, 1995). The resources of an actor that enable collective action (including the phase or moment actors were experiencing when the pandemic outbreak, e.g. phase of activity, phase of abeyance), its pre-existing network, its degree of formalization (in a word: its organizational structure), its "plan of collective action intended to accomplish goals within a particular context" (Maney et al. 2012:17), i.e. strategy, as well as the limited set of forms of action available (repertoire of contention) models the views on what actions are considered as the most effective. *Identity-related* elements refers essentially to collective identity (Melucci 1989; Jasper 1997;Polletta and Jasper 2001) and they establish parameters to assess the legitimacy of a particular form of action. These endogenous characteristics are crucial starting points for my investigation as they shaped actors' reactions to the pandemic. When the pandemic out-broke, indeed, actors made sense of the social world, and positioned themselves within, in interaction with their specific background, identity and their limited range of learned and practiced options for contentious action available. While the power of contingent choices and newly emerging opportunities in intense times may have paved the way for unexpected pathways - as repeatedly underlined so far - it is undeniable that even these choices were assessed on the wake of their pre-pandemic conditions[7]. After all, an investigation into the process of change after a critical event must start with an outline of the initial characteristics of the object undergoing transformation (or, to revisit the example mentioned earlier, the actor in a the time T0) before the event itself. Second, we have a constituted outcome, which is the same social movement organization variously altered by a process of change in a post-emergency temporality - which for this project is time-bounded to the data collection period, i.e. Autumn 2022 for the Milan cases; Spring 2023 for the Parisian cases. My goal is to reconstruct the steps of the sequence between these two stages. Not to explain punctuated decisions in certain points in time; but to identify how these steps connected to each other giving life to a path, which is to explain the process.

In order to analytically discipline the open-ended quality of processual change, I suggest that, in an emergency situation like the Covid-19 pandemic, it is possible to hypothesize, starting from McAdam et al. (2001), that a limited set of interactions altered the connections at the level of environment, relations and cognition. Let us have a closer look at each of them.

[7] On why certain forms of action are selected, see among others Doherty and Hayes (2004) and Taylor and Van Dycke (2004).

The idea that changes in the political environment affect movements emergence (Tarrow 1989; Oberschall 1996; Kriesi et al. 1995), strength (Rucht 1996), strategy (McAdam 1982; Kitschelt 1986) and outcomes (Meyer 2003) is a well-established tenet in social movement scholarship. However, one has to ask how the dynamic interplay between movement organizations and the environment played out in presence of a global health emergency. Literature largely addressed this conundrum as showed in the first part of the chapter. In particular, research showed that restrictions on movement and gatherings and the overall centralization of political decision-making in emergency times constrained space for action. At the same time, increasing social injustice and rampant poverty created discursive openings for progressive social movements' long-standing claims (della Porta 2022a). Overall, we can expect that cumulative changes in the political environment had a considerable bearing on movement goals' attainment, and, hence, on the strategy to attain those goals. I add also that what may have counted as *meaningful* environment was not only the (national, regional or local) political environment *stricto sensu*. Indeed, we know from existing writings that initial restrictions fuelled responses more focused at local level (ibidem). This leads me to hypothesize that the social environment of a movement organization, understood as the physical and symbolic perimeter of action and struggle of an organization – hence the immediate physical and social setting in which actors operate and that they co-construct – may as well have been subject to transformations. These transformations likely played out in actors' pathways, shaping their interactions with the broader context in which they were situated.

Changes at the environmental level, however, did not inherently present themselves as facilitating or constraining action. Instead, they were perceived as opportunities or threats upon a process of interpretation by actors, which moves us to the cognitive level. Building on the relevance of organizations' antecedent condition, I can expect indeed that different actors saw and interpreted the context in a different way. Presumably, this process of collective interpretation of the sudden changed situation included also grappling with the dilemma of whether and how to respond to it. At the same time, I can suppose that this dynamic occurred more than once over the emergency's longitudinal unfolding. For example, actors may have chosen the forms of action believed as the most effective and/or legitimate within a sudden emergency context. However, as strategic calculations presumably transformed in response to the progression of the pandemic, actors might have reinterpreted which actions to adopt.

Finally, relational changes may have occurred both at intra-organizational level and between organizations. At intra-organizational level, a stronger sense of group belonging may have emerged from the need to collectively make sense of the unfolding events, thereby preventing individuals

from succumbing to a sense of loss of control over the situation. However, conversely, the fear of contagion and lockdown measures may have weakened group bonds as well. Finally, as legal constraints and declining resources undermine the capacity to organize independently, we can expect some inter-organizational dynamics to have developed as well. For example, pragmatic concerns on how to address peoples' exacerbated needs may have accelerated the formation of networks to pull together complementary resources.

These hypothesised mechanisms are just possible scenarios. Their occurrence is a matter of empirical investigation as well as the understanding of what triggered them, whether the emergency itself or rather how actors responded to it – that is, if they were experienced cross-cuttingly by organizations as a result of the change in context or whether their occurrence was related to what actors chose to do in that context. At this stage, I can assume that both dynamics occurred. For example, the mechanism suggested above indicating actors interacting with the dilemma of how to react, was presumably cross-cutting as triggered by the uncertainty driven by a sudden and dramatic emergency. Others, such as networking, were more likely case-specific as defined by contingent dynamics. It may be hence the case that not all SMOs experienced the same mechanisms. These depended indeed on actors' reactions to the pandemic. It follows that responses to the emergency highly influenced SMOs trajectories in the medium-run. This drives me to include *reaction to the pandemic* as a relevant 'antecedent condition' to consider. What collective groups did during the pandemic indeed had a generative capacity capable of influencing change by laying the ground to mechanisms. Hence, I include it among the 'antecedent conditions' in chapter 4 together with the *instrumental* and *identity* background dimensions. To reiterate, I am not interested in how actors reacted, per se, but in how their reactions affected the diachronic unfolding of movements trajectories. My assumption is that reactions to the pandemic generated mechanisms whose concatenation loomed long influencing meso-level change trajectories.

Such an argument allows me to address the specific concern of this thesis with explaining actors' transformation *after* emergency times that I consider as *intense times*. Scrutinizing the impact of the emergency by focusing on the mechanisms it triggered reflects della Porta's call to pay attention to the eventful impact of contentious events on movements themselves. In particular, she demonstrated that these events have "cognitive, affective and relational impacts on the very movements that carry them" (della Porta 2008:28). Many protests "reproduce, rather than just consuming, resources of solidarity and collective identification, fuelling positive emotions of empowerment. During eventful

protests, participants experiment with new tactics, send and receive signals about the possibility of collective action, create and experience feelings of belonging as occasions for interactions multiply". Despite not dealing with a specific protest event, I follow her intuition in that I am interested in whether the pandemic emergency has been eventful, meaning whether it transformed actors *during* the emergency itself *and* after it. Hence, looking at the mechanisms triggered by actors' reactions to the emergency may be a fruitful analytical strategy. Specifically, it is always della Porta in her more recent work on progressive politics during Covid-19 (2022) to show that, in the face of disruptive events, collective action may stimulate affective, cognitive and relational mechanisms. Specifically, agency during intense times creates arenas for encounters to take place. This, in turn, forges relational dynamics and a spirit of within-group trust and belonging. The intensification of relational networks and the assessment of living in an exceptional dramatic moment may stimulate a 'cognitive liberation' (McAdam 1988), an opening to "the possibilities of collective action to create something radically different" (Harvey 2012). From this point of view, social movements become channels for making sense of the abrupt situation and, as normal routines are temporarily suspended, cognitive laboratories of alternative visions. In particular, the social construction of reality is transformed as what was used to be considered strong and stable looks suddenly changeable. It is relevant to note two things. First, the heuristic value of the verb "*may*". What just described are, again, just possible mechanisms generated by agency in intense times, to confirm through empirical analysis. Second, bringing *affective* mechanisms into the picture, della Porta (2020) recognised the causal force of emotions permeating contentious actions. Movements are indeed affected by transitory, context-specific emotions as well as by more stable affective bonds and loyalties (Jasper 2011). Presumably, considering the potential significance of emotional mechanisms as causally meaningful is particularly suitable in the context of this dissertation. An health emergency may evoke fear of others, potentially hindering action, as well as a sense intense emotions such as indignation and compassion, prompting individuals to participate in the collective effort against the virus. I hence integrate McAdam et al. (2001)'s concern into environmental, cognitive and relational mechanisms by considering also the emotional dynamics that may have shaped organizations' pathways of change.

Processual paths of change are temporally sequenced and contextualised. The final piece of the puzzle consists hence in interrogating whether emergency-related mechanisms had a transformative impact on actors in the medium run, i.e. whether they left durable consequences. Coherently with the two temporalities at stake, my argument is that the shift from the temporality of emergency -

that I conceive as intense times - to normal, predictable, post-emergency times brought about alterations in the interactions at the level of emotions, cognition, environment and relations. As an example, the above described feeling of trust and belonging forged during action in intense times may have vanished as the temporality of normalcy came back, with possible consequences at the level of collective identity or strategic calculations. Overall, I expect that during the emergency the mechanism *adjustments* occurred, meaning actors engaged in a series of organizational and repertoire adaptations in order to face the emergency context in the short-run. However, as the emergency spiralled into a post-emergency, I hypothesize that adjustments may have influenced actors medium-term change via the operation of three key mechanisms:

- *Re-equilibration*: it describes a dynamic whereby actors came back to their pre-pandemic conditions. The pandemic emergency in this sense was a critical juncture in that it impacted on activists only while it unfolded. Emergency-related *adjustments* were exceptional in that bounded to emergency conditions.

- *Sedimentation:* intense times can lead to what Della Porta (2018) called "sedimentations": short-term contingent adjustments stabilize and become long-term outcomes. For example, some of the repertoire or organizational adjustments potentially emerged during emergency times may have been adopted by activists and become part of their repertoire or organizational toolkit when the temporality of the emergency became less relevant.

- *Renovation:* it is a mechanism indicating that adjustments put in place to face the emergency sedimented *and* gave way, in turn, to transformations. Renovation presupposes sedimentation but it is not limited to that. It indicates that adjustments sedimented *and* continued transforming actors in ways that were different from those during intense times.

Finally, before concluding, there is one issue that I have bracketed until this point. To say that I look at meso-level change as a process does not tell much about the *what* of change, meaning the reader lacks information regarding which changes I will focus on. My strategy to deal with this currently obscure spot is twofold. First, I maintain that by illustrating the mechanisms underlying the process, I can precisely explore the transformations that have taken place. To a certain degree, hence, the *what* of change is a matter of investigation as well. Yet, a purely inductive approach would lead me to have disparate evidence on changes across different dimensions without much coherence. Recognising this insufficiency, my second strategy is to assume the instrumental and identity

elements I referred to in the paragraph above as 'antecedent conditions' as primary *sites of change*. Literature stresses that identity and organization are not static givens but change in relation to the context (Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; Kriesi et al. 1995). In particular, we know from della Porta (2022) that the pandemic juncture transformed actors during the emergency prompting their adaptations in three relevant dimensions: organization, repertoires of contention and frames. Therefore, despite I refer to a generic process of change, I discipline its evidence by arguing that it could manifest in different patterns and thus become a transformation process more closely linked to the *symbolic level* or to the *organizational level*. With the former, I capture changes regarding the symbolic and cultural elements of collective action, while with the latter I refer to transformations related to the organizational structure and repertoire of contention. As will be evident in the empirical part, the two dimensions are not mutually exclusive but often follow each other.

2.5 Conclusions

This chapter outlined the theoretical and analytical framework of this dissertation. To set the stage to that task, I argued that the pandemic was an emergency, a sudden and unpredictable event disrupting democracy both in its procedural and substantial features, resulting in an overall worsening of the democratic quality. This starting point allowed me to lay the ground for progressive movements role in such circumstances, that, despite their unprecedentedness - at least in recent times, have much in common with other periods of uncertainty and crisis recently faced, like the economic crisis, the migration crisis the climate emergency. Existing works on those periods already showed that crisis times may be provide fertile terrain for movements' agency and so was the case for the pandemic. Indeed, analyses to date showed that, despite obvious challenges to action driven by freedoms restrictions, pandemic times have been contentious times for progressive social movements. In particular, with regard to my analytical focus, these works provided evidence of series of adaptations, that I referred to as adjustments, collective actors engaged with in order to mobilise in a suddenly changed context. However, that is pretty much all we know in terms of change from existing literature. Existing works are indeed time bounded almost exclusively to 2020. This partly explains their suffering from a normative take on social movements during the pandemic, that is to say, they treat the pandemic as a critical juncture that progressive social movements can exploit to trigger social change. Moreover, existing works tend to concentrate on progressive social movements during the pandemic as a unified entity, as if the pandemic had an homogenous impact on all the social movement organizations involved in them.

Following these gaps, I have argued that the pandemic impact on social movement organizations is reduced to a black box. Research focused on *what actors did* (the end outcome) yet not providing clues on the conditions and the specific steps that allowed specific actors to respond in a certain way to the emergency context. Not to mention the exclusive focus on agency, which, although understandable in terms of analytical interest – scholars have indeed always preferred to focus on action -, leaves choices of not to respond to the pandemic in a shadow cone.

In order to make up for these gaps, my argument is that it is necessary to interrogate prevalent critical-juncture interpretations. This is not for a disregard of this reading but for the necessity to subject it to empirical scrutiny. Since I am interested in meso-level change after it – therefore I am specifically concerned not with some 'general' change but with change *after* an emergency – this means asking whether the pandemic was a transformative event, meaning whether it had a lasting transformative impact on actors or whether they returned to previous, pre-pandemic conditions. In order to approach this questions, I called for a pluralisation of the time perspectives embedded within the pandemic unfolding. Adopting a longer timeframe which covers the triennium 2020-2023, I maintained that the pandemic comprised two temporalities, the temporality of emergency, which I conceive as intense times, and the temporality of the post-emergency, which I address to as times characterized by a gradual time normalization. This allowed me also to maintain that a shift in temporalities implied a change in environmental challenges and opportunities forcibly influencing actors' agency. Post-emergency change of actors is to be first of all understood as taking place within the context of an environment which was, itself, undergoing change. Then, to look at how the pandemic transformed actors' in the medium-run, I argued for the necessity to look at agency not in adaptive terms but also in generative terms. This means that how actors reacted to the emergency phase of the pandemic could have left legacies on them over the post-emergency temporality as well, ultimately influencing their trajectories of change.

To understand how these dynamics played out and whether and how those legacies were forged, I choose to rely on a processual approach to change. This means that I look at it not as an outcome but as a temporal, diachronic process dependent upon the multiple, interacting dynamics captured via the notion of 'mechanisms'. Drawing on McAdam et al. (2001) yet integrating it with an attention to emotions (della Porta 2008), in the empirical part I am hence to search for the environmental, cognitive, emotional and relational mechanisms which, combined, yielded actors' post-emergency change. As part of my comparative effort, comparing actors' processes of change will consist in a cross-actors exploration of their constituting mechanisms. Given the possible disparate evidence on change, I condense it as manifesting in two main types of dimensions - which

allow me to regroup the main characteristics of a movement organization - : transformations related to the actors' symbolic and instrumental dimensions.

CHAPTER 3

Research design and methods

3.1 Introduction

The chapter presents the research design and the methodological choices and dilemmas addressed before and during fieldwork, including in the phase of data analysis. It discusses the literature relating to the chosen methodology and it justifies its design based on the appropriateness of the instruments used for investigation, as well as for the larger purpose of this study. The chapter is divided into three sections. Section 3.1 details the research design, making explicit the implicitly acknowledged philosophical assumptions that shape the study (Section 3.1.1). It delves into the research strategy of this work specifying how I came up with the research question (Section 3.1.2). It then describes the research approach and the case selection process (3.1.3), pointing at the reasons that drove the choice of Italy and France as contexts for comparative analysis (3.1.4). Section 3.2 illustrates the procedures of participants sampling, the methods of data collection (3.2.1, 3.2.2, 3.2.3), processing and analysis (3.2.4). Finally, given the involvement of the inquirer in a sustained and extensive experience with participants, as well as its active role in shaping interpretation, Section 3 critically introduces issues relating to triangulation, reflexivity, positionality and ethics while the last paragraph addresses the limitations of this study.

3.2 Research Design

3.2.1 Research approach and paradigm

This project relies on a qualitative research design. This choice has been informed by the nature of the topic and of the research question addressed. To put it simply, understanding movements' practices, reconstructing their meso-level trajectories overtime through the micro-level experiences of activists are harsh to grasp by quantitative measures. A qualitative research design followed therefore as a better fit for the research aims at the centre of this study. Indeed, according to (Cresswell and Cresswell 2018), qualitative research is used to inquire into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The key idea behind it is thus to explore the problem or the issue - in my case, the process of change in contentious politics after a critical juncture - from the participants' viewpoint. A qualitative design answered thus the need to capture detail and *complexity* in the understanding of movements continuities and discontinuities in a

longitudinal perspective, which could only be achieved by talking directly to people and allowing them to tell the story of their social movement organisation (from now on SMO or SMOs) from their own point of view. From an epistemological and ontological perspective, this work acknowledges the methodological pluralism dominant in the field of social movement research (della Porta 2014). While indeed social science research is dominated by a somewhat Manichean dispute between post-positivist and constructivist views on the nature of reality and on the possibility of knowledge, social movement scholars have tended to develop more nuanced views whereby social realities external to social actors and as perceived and constructed by social actors have been understood as intimately linked (Della Porta, 2014). This work does not exceed this line of reasoning: the structure and its properties (e.g. the temporality of the emergency with its related challenges and opportunities and the political opportunity structure of the national contexts under study) matter insofar as they are experienced, perceived and hence constructed by social actors. This important caveat notwithstanding, the research design of this dissertation is informed by specific stances towards certain aspects concerning the nature of social reality, the nature of knowledge and the role of the research, that overall make up the paradigm or worldview underlying the research (Denzin and Lincoln 2000; Huberman and Miles 2002).

Specifically, this thesis builds upon constructivist and interpretivist lenses (Schwandt, 1994; Mertens, 1998). In ontological terms, this hints to the idea of reality being constructed through the interactions among human beings that participate in the same society. It follows that, from an epistemological point of view, knowledge is not meant to be objective but rather subjective and co-created by socially constructed meanings. The consequence of this paradigmatic stance is not to consider reality as one, unique and objective fact. If that was the case, the task at the core of this study to carve out the processual trajectories of across social movement organisations would be pointless. I would argue for the impact of the same Covid-19 structural constraint to be objectively given and we would expect similar social movement actors, as are the ones considered in this study, to react the same to it. Empirically, this would require me to hear only from one participant per SMO. There would indeed be no reasons in pluralising the viewpoints collected because everybody would provide the same version of the phenomenon under study. At the same time, if we assumed social reality to be nothing but the result of individuals' viewpoints, my research endeavour would be equally worthless. The reconstructions of SMO's trajectories would be highly individual-dependent, and a potential higher level synthesis of them made impossible by the necessarily fragmentary and multiple nature that a reality conceived in individual-centric terms would have. On the other hand, constructivists lay claim that reality is the product of social construction. People

interact and socially co-create meanings through which they understand who they are, what happens to them and around them. In this PhD thesis, adopting a constructive stance means that the external and internal factors that shape SMO's trajectories matter not as objectively given but as filtered by the mediating processes through which people and movement organisations attribute meanings to them (Melucci 1989). In this perspective, "social movements are the work of both social actors and the framework of limits imposed upon them by the institutions of our society" (Hjelmar 1996). For example, the impact of Covid-19 is explored as mediated by social actors, and specifically by actors' pre-pandemic conditions. Recognizing the importance of these initial conditions enabled me to remain loyal to the specificities of each case's trajectories despite the abstraction required for their comparison. Attention to initial conditions therefore allowed me to contextualize the analysis of the particularities, modalities, varieties that led to change or its absence in each case. This also guarded me against the risk to conceive a deterministic link between the macro-level context and agency. While macro-level external contexts have objective distinctive features – i.e., in this study, the exacerbation of socioeconomic grievances during the pandemic emergency and its aftermath, the policy measures adopted in response by Italian and French government; the political opportunity structure -, these features act as constraints or opportunities for action only insofar as they are understood as such by the actors considered. In this sense, the meanings that social actors assign to their interactions – and experiences – shape the social realities that they inhabit. These realities must then be understood as the outcomes of continuous meaningful interactions among social actors. Interestingly enough, the way interviewees framed and counter-framed the Covid-19 management - highlighting for the example the abuse of police deployment during the Spring 2020 lockdown and attributing the deficiencies of hospitals to the privatisation trends in the healthcare sector over last years – signal in itself the fact that even the rules of policymaking underpinning policies are value-laden and, as such, social constructions. Conducting a qualitative study on contentious politics within this paradigm position comes with empirical consequences. Since meanings are socially constructed though interactions, staying "in the field", in close contact with social movement organisations, minimizing the distance (Guba 1994) between the researcher and those being study becomes crucial to observe those meanings in the making. This is not to deny the explanatory potential of action provided by more rational and strategy-oriented theories such as the resource mobilization (Zald and McCarthy 1987) or the political process theories (McAdam 1982). Rather, embracing social constructivist premises means considering resources (i.e., the increase in participation during the lockdown phase as was the case for some of the SMOs considered) and strategy as filtered by actor's perception of the contexts in which they are situated. This

epistemological assumption underlies the specific choice to place activists' perceptions, practices and views at the centre of the my analysis of social movement organizations' change. In this sense, grassroots organisations' change is captured not against indexes or objective criteria but as experienced and made sense of by activists' subjective interpretations of it (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

3.2.2 Research strategy

Reflecting the nature of qualitative research, the research strategy underlying this work was emergent and processual, shaped and reshaped by the unexpected outcomes of fieldwork and by their dialogue with theory. In particular, the research problem at the centre of this thesis has been constructed during the empirical work. I started with a loose initial plan for research, articulated around a very wide research question: *what does it mean to make social justice from below?* With this formulation, the impetus for research was to understand how the concept of social justice was signified, meant and practiced from below. I therefore started an exploratory phase of fieldwork in Milan[8] using social justice as a sensitizing concept and as a compass to provide guidance to the research topic (Blumer 1954). Sensitizing concepts are background ideas (Charmaz, 2003), providing guidance in the process of inductive research (Glaser, 1978; Padgett, 2004) and laying the foundation for data analysis in absence of pre-conceived hypotheses – which made them at the central stage of grounded theory studies. They can be refined, tested, improved during the research process as well as employed at different stages of the overall study, from its nascent exploratory phase to later rounds of data collection and analysis. The ultimate survival of a sensitizing concept "depends on where the data take us" (Padgett, 2004) provided that the shifting grounds of such a qualitative approach may breed new concepts, that may eventually supplement and displace the previous ones. Given this premise, I set out with a very general and vaguely defined concept, with only some clues and suggestions about what to look for during fieldwork. My aim indeed was not to interrogate the application of a somewhat a-priori definition of social justice to the social reality; rather, my intention was to let the meaning of the concept to be developed by the social actors investigated – for then subsequently refine it according to the cross-actors commonalities emerged during fieldwork. I therefore drafted an interview guide around this initial research question and started an exploratory fieldwork phase with grassroots social movement organisations varying for

[8] The choice of Milan will be justified later in the chapter.

sector of mobilisation, what at that stage I conceptualised as 'areas of social justice'[9]. Among the various interview questions on the meanings and practices of social justice from below, I included a question on the impact of Covid-19 on actors' activity. The reason for this is that I conducted fieldwork right after the peak of the pandemic so it felt necessary to include such a question, also because it allowed to explore whether anything of what they have been telling me on the meanings and practices of social justice anyhow changed with the pandemic. By interpreting and analysing these initial broad interviews, I found out that progressive social movement actors were emphasising a varying impact of Covid health crisis on their beyond-emergency action[10]. For some of them, it represented a real watershed in terms of practices, resources and objectives; others had only been partially affected by its induced changes, while a last deal of them did not bear any significant longer-term legacy of it. In other words, data suggested diverging collective actors' transformational trajectories after the contingency of the health crisis. These findings prompted me to shift my focus from what initially planned to pursue – i.e., social justice practices – into this direction (McAdam, 1998). The topics of successive waves of interviewing were therefore narrowed down to focus the issue of change that emerged as central. This reconstruction underscores the processual and open-ended nature of qualitative research with all phases of the process - including, in my case, the research question - that change after the generation of unexpected findings from fieldwork. In accordance with Blee (2019), interactions with participants affected theorizing by channelling what I understood as a puzzle to be investigated.

In terms of research strategy, I relied on an inductive approach to research. Theory building process was the result of abstractions derived by induction from the data and, as such, the outcome of the research. Notwithstanding that, I entered the field sensitive to some analytical concepts and with suggestions from theory, that forcefully influenced my fieldwork. As an example, I used the concepts and expectations developed in social movement studies as a compass for empirical enquiry. At first, I proceeded by clustering changes per dimensions: the repertoire of action (Tilly, 1978), collective identity (Melucci, 1995) and organisational structures, specifically, were treated as starting dimensions of transformation, that is as potential sites to zoom in to look for signs of change. Research on contentiousness in periods of crisis such as during the 2008 economic crisis

[9] This means I started out my sampling on the ground with the idea of choosing grassroots actors mobilising on different social justice-related issues: labour, migration, gender, poverty, environment, among the others. While this was the initial fieldwork plan, I eventually did not complete the sampling following this criterion given the substantial shift in the question driving the research.

[10] Here, I should make explicit that all the actors in this study held critical positions towards the policy management of the crisis and of the social problems Covid-19 shed further light on,. Not all of them, though, made this "contestation stance" explicit, nor did they make it concrete though the same forms of action or at the same time – and this contributed to give way to different long-term post-pandemic trajectories, whose analysis this study aims to explore.

and its aftermaths (Della Porta, 2015; Bosi and Zamponi, 2019) as well as those on agency during the Covid-19 itself (Della Porta, 2022) have indeed provided evidence on the three above-mentioned features as linked to contexts of emerging grievances and broad opportunities and constraints. Then, striving for a higher theoretical abstraction beyond case specifities, I drew on a processual perspective to the analysis of what caused change (Blumer 1951; McAdam 1982; Tilly 1985, 1998; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2001). Specifically, I relied on a mechanism-based analytical framework (Alimi et al. 2015; Bosi et al. 2014) which allowed me to identify patterns of change and their varied, not constant, cross-cases constituting concatenation of mechanisms and sub-mechanisms. I acknowledge that mechanisms and sub-mechanisms identified do not exhaust all the forces at play in explaining an outcome – this would be an endless task to move into all possible directions; nevertheless, it was a pragmatic analytical strategy path for cases comparison.

3.2.3 Research methodology and case selection

Trends in social movement research agree on the pluralist attitude of the field both from a methodological and theoretical point of view (Della Porta, 2014). The former finds its reasons in the challenges regarding empirical analysis. The lack of reliable databases on social movements indeed urged scholars to import and adapt data collection and analysis methods from various fields. The need for a certain degree of pragmatism in gathering knowledge, thus, was a crucial driver for the use of plural data collection instruments. The latter is rooted in the very origin of the field. Situated at the crossroads of different disciplinary approaches – most notably sociology, political science and history – social movement studies have constructed their toolkit of concepts and hypotheses by combination and cross-fertilisation. Therefore, infusion of multiple inputs from various disciplines led the field to be naturally open in methodological terms too (Klandermans et al. 2002). This thesis reflects this double eclecticism by being based, from a theoretical point of view, on two areas of scholarship, namely political sociology and political science and, from a methodological point of view, on a comparative case study design (Yin 2013). While case strategies typically (Blatter et al., 2016), they fruitfully liaise with more interpretivist methodologies and methods when employed in research concerning social movements - which resonates with the methodological pluralism discussed so far. Either based on single (Bromlet et al. 1979; Goodwin's 1977; Lofland 1977) or multiple cases (Staggenborg 1988; Cress et al. 1996; 2000), case study research designs have been indeed extensively employed in the study of collective action.

Differing for their empirical foci, case studies share certain broad characteristics After having examined a number of conceptual works, Snow et al. (2016) condensed them into three aspects,

namely a) the investigation of an instant or variant of some bounded phenomenon, that is, all the cases must be cases of *something* b) the generation of thick, richly detailed understanding of the phenomenon via c) multiple methods triangulation. Applying this tripartite definitional scheme to this project, the case study strategy was chosen because it best suited the objective to study SMOs change. Change as an object of research was indeed explored via 1) the identification of its patterned manifestations across cases and 2) the comparison of its constituting trajectories . In this sense, the post-emergency pathways of social movement organisations under scrutiny – my cases or units of analysis – acted as specific illustrations of the process of progressive social movement organisations change - my object of interest. In this sense, this work aimed at rich descriptions of multiple instances of the same phenomenon, the process of change, whereby case study approach followed as the most appropriate choice to capture it. The "detailed, thick and holistic elaboration of the case" (Snow et al. 2002) attests to the contextualized and embedded character of the object of analysis. In this regard, Snow et al. (1991) refer to case studies as holistic analyses of cultural "systems of actions". In social movement scholarship, "systems of action" are terrains of enquiry variable in scope, from highly focused and microscopic in terms of level of analysis – like processes associated with one movement - more meso-level –as when assessing the links between different SMOs within the same industry- or more macro-level oriented – i.e., a protest cycle. In the case of this case-study-based dissertation, the research objective of was to understand and illuminate how SMOs change –my system of action- was produced and reproduced by examining its interaction with other elements within particular contexts bounded in time and space (Snow et al. 1991). In this way, I was able to produce a thick elaboration of collective actors' change trajectories embedded in specific movement cultures and anchored to different macro-level contexts – Italy and France and Milan and Paris.

The development of detailed and holistic investigations of case studies is reached through procedural triangulation of multiple methods – the third distinctive facet of the case study design. Association among a number of data-gathering methods is functional to case study research because it allows for the link between multiple sources of evidence which are generative of more multi-layered and nuanced understandings of the cases at hand. This marks an happy marriage between this type of design and the methodological pluralism inherent to social movement studies. Case study design enabled me to accommodate for the methodological eclecticism of the field. At first sight, case studies may seem a good way to investigate the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable in a X→ Y fashion in two different contexts. This may be argued to be the case

also for the impact of Covid-19, my supposed independent variable, on collective actors, the dependent one in Italy and France. However, by emphasizing the qualitative nature of this study and its constructivist underpinnings, I am suggesting the relationship between the two variables to be complex, nuanced and multifaceted. It is precisely by advocating for procedural triangulation that case studies allow for this complexity to come up. In this sense, Snow and Trom . (2002) define case studies not as a method per se but as a research strategy that combines with a variety of methods, including more qualitative techniques. In this project, I included ethnographic methods for data gathering such as participant observation, qualitative interviewing and the use of various documents indigenously generated by actors under consideration – each of whom described in detail below. The relevance of the use of such qualitative procedures to the case study is that they are grounded in real-life situations and setting, and are therefore more likely to generate the kinds of data that allow for the development of a rich understanding of collective actors' change. The choice for a case study strategy concerned also its accent on longitudinal timing. Literature has shown that case studies are particularly useful for grasping processes that unfold over a period of time (Snow et Trom, 2002), as in my case the meso-level investigation on change in progressive social movement organisations after the Covid-19. In this respect, the case study design enabled me to get a handle on the mechanisms and interactions that affected the process in question – social movement outcomes of Covid-19 juncture.

In terms of number of cases, this study adopts a multiple comparative cases design. Next lines explain what drove these choices, that of a multiple rather than single-base study, a comparative vis-à-vis an illustrative work (ibidem). SMOs were chosen as cases insofar as they were all variants of the category '*progressive social movement organisations'*. Drawing conceptual boundaries is always a delicate task for researcher as it impacts the process of inclusion/exclusion of empirical subjects. In this project, circumscribing my unit of analysis was an iterative and controversial process. Although '*progressive'* is a contested term - frequently critiqued for vagueness (Allen 2016; della Porta, 2020) - there were many reasons for this choice. Remarkably, it came out to be the case after a careful scrutiny of other options that have been alternatively used in the field over time. On the one hand, bare "social movement organisations" (Zald et al. 1966) did not adequately account for the commonality of the worldviews and political orientations of my cases. 'Grassroots political collectives' was another option considered but, while it resonated with the political subculture of the social centres typical of the '90s autonomist left in Italy - and most notably with almost all my cases in Milan - it had a weak grip on the social movement milieu French. During my fieldwork in Paris, indeed, I could not find perfectly correspondent political subjects rooted in the

legacies of that particular political *humus*. The label 'left-libertarian social movements', on the other hand, while specifically making up for these latter's flaw, was rooted in a classification dating back to works of the 90s, and, most notable, of Della Porta and Rucht's comparison of the left-libertarian movements in Italy and Germany (Della Porta and Rucht 1995), that reflected the specific political climate of the 60s-90s left - and of its related social base. However, this category resulted outdated when compared with more recent scholarship that analytically distinguishes left-wing groups according to their position over the distribution/recognition dilemma (Fraser 1995) an expedient that allowed to account for the differences between two broader progressive movement families, that of the old labour movements and the new social movements – e.g. building upon this distinction, Della Porta et al. (Della Porta, Castelli Gattinara, and Eleftheriadis 2020) used the category 'progressive actors' operationalizing it by distinguishing between leftist and civil rights organizations. Furthermore, I explored the possibility to circumscribe my sample in terms of 'left-wing social movement organisations' but, hinging upon the definition of Zald and Ash (Zald and Ash 1966), my cases should have been conceived as organized components of *a broader social movement*, as in the case of the 15 SMOs in eight US cities Cress and Snow chose as representative of the larger homeless social movement (Cress and Snow 1996, 2000). However, what is the larger, encompassing movement the cases in this study are part of? Does anything like a 'left-wing movement' exist today? The answer to this question and the quarrels that come with the definition of the boundaries of a left-movement today are above of the scope of this discussion. More recent studies accounted for the rise of 'progressive social movements' on race, class and the environment as opposed to the parallel steady development of far-right movements – and more broadly, of regressive politics in Europe (Mattoni and Roone 2022) and beyond (Porta et al. 2022). In particular, progressive social movements indicate actors that "struggle for an inclusive vision of a just society and for a deepening of democracy" (della Porta 2022a:4); in other words, progressive social movements are understood as those combining attention to social justice and positive freedom. I chose to use 'progressive social movements' because it was overarching enough to accommodate the differences in the social movement milieu in Milan and Paris. Moreover, it had and heuristic value in taking stock of the pluralisation of leftist-agency in terms of its issues and protagonists. This allowed me to keep together in my selection SMOs and collective groups with claims for social justice and democracy and eventually to come up with an array of cases varying in terms of issue and political subculture, despite all belonging to the leftist movement area.

For their selection, first I did a mapping of the social movement landscape in Milan and Paris identified via existing literature, social media and some preliminary interviews. I then chose some

relevant actors in the social movement terrain of the two cities, 6 in Paris, 5 in Milan. SMOs chosen all pre-existed Covid-19 and differed in terms of forms of organization, issue, degree of radicality and areas of the city. The only case exceeding the "pre-existing" nature of the SMOs selected were the Brigade de Solidarité Populaire in Paris. Though born as ad-hoc initiatives outside the groove of an established political subject, they were nonetheless the result of the reactivation of pre-existing informal movement networks. Moreover, some of them evolved into distinctive collective actors after the Covid-19 emergency phase, which makes them worthy of analytical attention. Lastly, rather than analysing the multiple cases as representative of a unique broader movement as in single-movement study (Staggenborg 1991), I examined them in a comparative framework that allowed for a more nuanced assessment of variation among the cases with respect to the broader process of change examined. A list of the sampled SMOs can be found below in Table 1 here below.

Table 1. Sample of social movement organizations in Milan and Paris

Social Movement	*Social movement organisation*	*City*	*Year of birth*	*Description*	*Collective actions*
Antifascist movement	Rimake	Milan	2014	Radical left collective born in 2014 with the aim of changing the way of doing politics, from political analyses to concrete action	Debates; Italian language courses, popular lunches, space of mutual trade-union aid; housing rights desk; alternative leisure and educational activities
Antifascist/ Anticapitalist movement	Collective Zam	Milan	2010	Radical left collective born on the wave of the Onda anomala students' mobilization in Italy against the Gelmini laws between 2008 and 2010	Public demonstrations; debates; squatting; cultural and political activities, alternative leisure and education
Housing movement	Spazio 20092	Milan (Cinisello Balsamo)	2015	Born as a housing squat within the Cinisello's housing movement, it is an antifascist and radical left collective	Squatting for sheltering migrants; Public demonstrations; debates; housing rights desk; cultural and political activities, alternative leisure and education
Antifascist movement	Lambretta	Milan	2012	Radical left collective born on the wave of the Onda anomala students' mobilization in Italy against the Gelmini laws between 2008 and 2010	Public demonstrations, debates; cultural and political activities, alternative leisure and education
Yellow Vests	Gilets Jaunes de Montreuil	Paris (Montreuil)	2018	Local group of the broader Yellow Vests movement. Leftist background of this specific group	Protests actions: pickets; political initiatives; solidarity weekly canteen.
Brigades de Solidaritè Populaire (BSP)	BSP de Montreuil - Bagnolet	Paris (Montreuil)	2020	Ad-hoc initiative with a leftist background born in response to the pandemic	Weekly canteen; help-desks activists in particular legal advice and French language courses to migrants.
Brigades de Solidaritè Populaire	BSP d'Aubervilliers-Pantin	Paris (Aubervilliers)	2020	Ad-hoc initiative from a leftist background born in response to the pandemic	Activities with migrants, food distribution
Extiction Rebellion France (XR	XR Paris Nord	Paris	2019	Local group of the broader XR movement in Paris	Civil disobiedience actions; educational activities; public demonstrations

France)					
Antifascist/ Anticapitalist movement	18e en lutte	Paris	2018	Neighbourhood anticapitalist collective based in the 18th arrondissement	Public demonstrations; debates; political leisure activities

3.2.4 A comparative research design: Italy and France, Milan and Paris

The cross-country comparative method has been frequently used in social movement studies and started spreading in the '80s and '90s. It was precisely during those years that interest increased on the politics of social movements, including the macro-conditions for their emergence and their political role. From there on, a number of work have adopted a Western-focused cross-national comparison to study the antinuclear movement (Cooper 1997; Nelkin 1978), the peace movement (Rochon 1988) the ecological and the environmental movements (Rucht 1999) as well as new social movements (Kriesi et al. 1995) and political violence (della Porta 1995a). This scholarship focused on comparing how national political characteristics or significant historical events affected social movements. In this thesis, the choice of a comparative research design was functional upon the investigation of how the same phenomenon, i.e. *change*, took place differently across cases (SMOs) after their being exposed to the same structural constraint of the pandemic, yet in two different national settings. Hence, this is a case-oriented research (Blatter and Haverland 2012; George and Bennett 2005; Gerring 2007; Rohlfing 2012) based on cross-national comparative analysis. A small-N comparative research design was here preferred in order to understand complex units by "grasping the relations among its constituent parts" (della Porta and Keating 2008). As a case-based comparative research design, it has little interest in generalizations. Rather, it strives for a spatial and temporality bounded dense knowledge of the cases under study. Cases are thus addressed as *complex units*, analysed in their specificity and embeddedness in the their own environment. This does mean that its inherent logic is devoid of any causal-analytic purpose, as this project itself shows. Theorization and generalization are provided by the construction of ideal types of change, abstract models against which complex cases can be understood. Importantly, the logic of "explanation" lies not in generalizable relations among variables but in thick descriptions of the selected cases. Their number is purposely low in order to systematically analyse them on a large number of characteristics. Cases – within a clear definition of progressive social movement organisations – differ from each other, leading to a deep exploration of diversity.

I did not determine cases at the beginning but I selected them inductively in the course of the research process "through a systematic dialogue of ideas and evidence" (Ragin 2009). First, I identified the framework of my research and my research questions, based on the understanding of the trajectories of progressive social movement organisations and collective groups after Covid-19. I started from the assumption that all my cases were examples of progressive social movement organizations (Zald and Ash 1966) and I circumscribed my sample following some criteria. I wanted to include the most active actors 1) mobilising on both material and post-material issues (Della Porta and Rucht 1995) 2) located both *intra* and *extra moenia* with respect to the

metropolitan city boundaries 3) lively protagonists of the social movement milieu either at local or national level 4) having behaved differently during the pandemic 5) paying attention to include the most active groups before the pandemic. It should be mentioned that the logic of case selection followed the ebbs and flows of fieldwork. The degree to which the case selected belonged to the same category – therefore *their comparability* – was assessed in the course of the research itself (Ragin 2009). This is especially true given the reconfiguration of the research question after the first exploratory fieldwork phase in Milan. Indeed, after the first round of fieldwork in Milan, I changed my research question in line with the evidence emerged. At that stage, I had already full knowledge of actors' post-pandemic trajectories and I drew on this insight to select those to concentrate on. In Milan, therefore, four among my cases were opted for following a dependent-variable driven logic. That is to say, I chose those cases that differed regarding the outcome under investigation – change and its extent - focusing on both positive and negative cases.

As mentioned in the paragraphs above, my initial research question revolved around the making of social justice from below. I was interested in understanding how grassroots political actors signified, practiced and politicised social justice. At the centre of political philosophy discussions, the concept of social justice roughly calls into question the distribution of the benefits and burdens of social cooperation. Within this framework, Italy emerged as a meaningful country for different reasons. First, because of the economic, social and political setting. Italy is indeed a very unequal country[11], hardly hit by the 2008 financial crisis and by the related austerity measures. Worsening economic grievances were one among the factors breeding the ground for populist and extreme right-wing parties electoral successes (Caiani and Graziano 2019), catalysing support on welfare chauvinist claims around who *deserves* to get what. Second, because of the peculiarity of the Italian progressive social movement resistance to the crisis. Despite the absence of a proper Italian anti-austerity movement beyond disparate protest events (Andretta 2017), literature showed the mushrooming adoption by movement organizations of what Bosi and Zamponi defined 'direct social actions', namely forms of action that do not primarily focus upon claiming something from the State but point to directly transform some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself. These were adopted as a way to cope with the democratic and welfare deficits arising from the crisis years (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, 2015, 2019, 2020; Zamponi 2019; Zamponi and Bosi 2018). Third, for the feasibility of the project, since I am Italian and I know the language; because my activist background with the association Libera - a national anti-mafia network between a plurality of individuals, groups and organizations - endowed me with a capital of knowledge of context, groups and spaces that could be potentially interesting for the research. Notwithstanding

[11] Italy scored 35.2 in its Gini index, the highest among Western Europe countries (Woldbank data, 2020).

the national cadre so far depicted, Italy is marked by significant socioeconomic disparities and most notably by an historically-rooted North/South divide. This is the reason why I decided to adopt a local focus by a within-country comparison among three cities located respectively in the Northern, Middle and Southern part of the country. In this former research design, Milan, the regional capital of Lombardy, represented immediately an emblematic case for my concern with social justice. The size of the city, the largest Italian metropolis with around 3 million inhabitants; its being the richest city in Italy with a metropolitan GDP per capita of €36.000 euro at metropolitan level and the biggest industrial and financial centre (Andreotti 2019); its social inequalities and high living costs resulting in the gentrification of the city and in the exacerbation of spatial segregation dynamics (Ranci 2009); the great vitality of its social movement milieu, marked by the large concentration of occupied social centres, rooted in the historical tradition of the social centres movement dating back to the Italian '70s (Consorzio Aaster et al., 1996; Ruggiero 2000; Membretti 2003; Mudu 2004; Montagna 2006, 2007; Membretti 2007; Pecorelli 2015; Bellotto 2022): all of these elements contributed to make the city a challenging case. The reshuffle of the research focus after the exploratory fieldwork phase calls for a clarification as well of the relevance of the choice of Italy and Milan for the investigation of SMOs post-emergency change. While a sound exploration of this is provided in Chapter 3, in this context suffice it to mention that Italy was the first European country affected by the pandemic and experienced its most severe impact. The region Lombardy was the most hardly hit by the spread of the virus, recording almost one sixth of all coronavirus cases in Italy. The provinces of Milan and Brescia accounted for a large part of this figure (Statista, as of May 2023). Nevertheless, Milan witnessed a surge in solidarity initiatives aimed at providing for pandemic-related needs. Progressive social movement organisations have been prominent actors in this regard and were organized mostly – but not exclusively – around the network of the Voluntary Brigades for the Emergency, in triangular concert with the Municipality of Milan and the NGO Emergency.

A cross-national comparative dimension allowed for the exploration of the role of national characteristics in shaping the outcome under study, i.e. trajectories of change in social movement organizations. That is to say, how the relationship between social movements and the contexts in which they are embedded mediated the effect of the same structural circumstance (Covid-19 impact) on similar actors in different settings. Comparing was required thus in order to gain a deeper understanding on the topic, by analysing different countries and political trajectories. Adopting the most-similar system approach (Della Porta and Keating 2008), and so reducing the number of 'disturbing' variables to be kept under control, France stood out as a second feasible case, due to several reasons. The two countries belong to the common geographical area of Western

Europe and share some degrees of historical tradition and cultural traits. Characterised by long traditions of stable bipolar systems organized around two mainstream parties - the Republicans and the Socialist Party and in France (Bornschier and Lachat 2009); Forza Italia and The Democratic Party in Italy -, with historically robust Communist and extreme right traditions, both countries underwent a political space restructuring in the 2010s (with 2018 and 2017 national elections respectively in Italy and France representing turning points in this regard), marked by the decline of traditional parties and the rise of challengers - the Five Star Movement on the hand (Karremans et al., 2019) and La Republique En marche!, on the other. Furthermore, Italy and France have strong populist radical right parties – the League and Brothers for in the Italian and the Front National in the French political landscapes – but they are dissimilar with regard to the radical left, electorally channelled by the leftist coalition NUPES in France, absent in a comparable institutional referent in Italy.

The countries arrived at the outset of the pandemic in the middle of a cycle of contention related to two different movements: the anti-populist-right Sardine movement in Italy and to the Yellow Vest Movement and the mobilisations against the project of pension reform in France. Contingently to the pandemic period, the countries were both heavily affected by the health crisis which they managed with similar policy measures involving a mix of economic support and lockdown policies. Paris was at the core of this processes. Capital of the rich Ile de France region, like Milan it is a rich city, winner of the processes of globalisation and urban financiarization. Historically, it has been at the epicentre of a series of movements that historically made France renowned per its protests record. During the pandemic, it was the birthplace of the Brigade de Solidaritè Populaire, originated at local level as a result of the transnational diffusion of those in Milan.

The choice of similar countries allowed me to reduce the range of possible variables, although at the cost of a reduced range of applicability of the research results. Aware of this limit, the comparative research design that informs this binary comparison aims to reach for middle-range theorization engrained in a thick contextualisation of the phenomena.

3.3 Data Collection, Instrumentations and Analysis

This section presents the methods of data collection employed for this project (Table 2). Their choice followed the social constructivist premise of capturing participants' meaning of the situations. This required first to conduct qualitative semi-structured interviews. Then, as meaning is typically forged in discussion or interaction with other people, participant observation was employed as a source of data. Online and offline material produced by activists was additionally

taken into consideration as a further avenue into the understanding of each social movement organisations and collective group.

3.3.1 Fieldwork, Cases, Setting

Fieldwork lasted one year, from June 2022 to June 2023, of which six months both for Milan and Paris. Sampling was initially conducted on a purposeful basis, namely via the recruitment of the main progressive social movement organisations and collective groups that were interesting from a conceptual standpoint. Specifically, I conducted a preliminary mapping of the most relevant pre-pandemic collective actors in Milan and Paris. This phase was driven by a combination of sources, including websites collecting information on local struggles (e.g. *milanoinmovimento.com* for Milan and *Agenda Miliant.org* and *Paris.lutte* in the case of Paris), participation in public initiatives and preliminary interviews with grassroots political subjects involved in the local social movement landscape. I employed the snowball technique to enlarge my sample to encompass progressive

Table 2. Data collection process

Sample	• *Cases*: purposive • *Interviews respondents*: long-time activists, activists that have been involved since the pandemic; where possible, activists that left the movement after the pandemic.
Data sources	• Activists' reconstructions • Public initiatives, protest events, direct social actions • Online and offline material produced by activists: documents, leaflets, social media profiles of groups, mailing lists, websites.
Data collection methods	• In-depth interviews • Online/offline participant observation • Manual archival of online/offline material
Timing	Longitudinal perspective, six months in Milan and six months in Paris
Setting	• Activists' territory • Digital space

movement actors that both mobilized and did not mobilize during the pandemic. Then, I purposefully refined my sample (Miles et al., 1994) to focus deeply on six and five relevant SMOs respectively for Milan and Paris. Their selection was based on two distinct factors. First, all cases

were part of the progressive political milieu and were representative of the social movement scene of Milan and Paris. My aim was to create a sample including units of analysis differing in terms of sector of mobilisation, organisational formats and range of activities. Second, they followed different transformative trajectories after the Covid-19 crisis. Overall, each of them represented a distinctive instance of change, in a continuum between negative (no change) to positive cases (complete change). This allowed me to account for the process of social movement organisations' transformation in its different manifestations. A summary of the sample, including the units of analysis and a description of their mobilisation area and main activities is provided in Table 2. Building on this general sampling picture, the rest of the paragraph accounts for the specificities that characterized fieldwork in Milan and Paris, respectively.

With respect to Milan, it is important to recall that I entered the field with the original research aim of exploring the making of social justice from below. This influenced the choice of how to access the local social movement milieu and the overall fieldwork exploratory phase. Specifically, my starting point for sampling was the Network of the Fair Numbers (Rete dei Numeri pari[12]). This is a national network that collects hundreds of social initiatives across the Italian territory (associations, social cooperatives, alternative production and consumption, movements for the right to house, popular libraries, mutualism projects, self-managed spaces, recovered factories) sharing the objective to grant social rights and dignity through the provision of a variety of services. I personally knew the Network out of my experience as a former activist in one of its SMOs, Libera. Therefore, I chose to start sampling from one of its Milan-based bottom-up organisation both for practical reasons – ease of access thanks to my previous my personal network of contacts – and empirical relevance with regard to my research question. The Network indeed describes itself as collecting initiatives promoting social justice from the bottom-up, which made it – if only, by definition – a potentially suitable gatekeeper to the field. From there, I expanded my sample outside the Network's boundaries thanks to snowball strategy. With regard to recruiting strategies, I first contacted the various organisations via a standardised text sent either by email and/or as a Facebook massage to the relevant organisations' pages and groups' profiles. Overall, I received a good response rate, frequently accompanied by invitations to attend their upcoming public events or internal assemblies. Those events gave me the opportunity to introduce myself in person, to explain my project and eventually to obtain groups' final approval to participate in the research. It is worth mentioning that only Cantiere, one among the most relevant political collectives in the local movement scene, explicitly declined to get involved in my project. As it has later been explained to me during a meeting with one of the activists of the organization, I discovered that their decision

[12] https://www.numeripari.org/

was mainly influenced by their past negative experiences with academia. They felt that academia had an "extractivist attitude" towards them as social movement agents being studied. Though I was sorry for their experience, the fact of having had this conversation at the beginning of fieldwork was extremely important because it pushed me to reflect on my approach with the groups I was about to work with – as I will explain in the section about reflexivity. Occasionally, I was fortunate enough to be given directly the WhatsApp contact information of the administrators of prospective SMOs that I was interested in including in my sample. This proved to be incredibly helpful, as it allowed me to accelerate the recruitment process and to connect with relevant individuals much more quickly. It was important to observe that when I asked activists to suggest additional collective groups names for sampling, there was a noticeable pattern of repetition in the names they cited. This observation is particularly interesting because it points to the high consistency of the activism network they were part of. At the same time, it also explains the easiness with which they were prone to share with me the personal contacts of activists of other organisations. Beyond being activist of allies groups, they knew each other personally and they were friends.

With regard to the French case, I had to adapt my sampling strategy due to the challenges in ensuring comparability between the actors to be sampled in Paris and those already sampled in Milan. First, there were no such groups resembling a typical radical left "social centres" or "political collective" in Paris, which stood in contrast to my main cases in Milan. The closest actors I found were two collective groups related to the antifascist movement in Paris, namely Jeaune Garde Paris and Action Antifasciste Paris-Banlieue, but I was not given the permission to access them for security reasons. Second, contrary to the majority of Milan's Voluntary Solidarity Brigades, the local Brigades de Solidaritè Populaires (BSP), emerged out of the transnational diffusion of the Milan's mobilisation experience during Covid-19, were ad-hoc experiences. This implies that under no circumstances were these actors formed by or overlapping with pre-existing groups, rendering them unsuitable as points of recruitment for the study of change. Nonetheless, the BSPs were the only local groups whose existence I was familiar with before arriving in France and their presence ultimately piqued my interest in selecting Paris as a comparative case. Therefore, I used them as initial access points for the preliminary phase of my fieldwork in Paris. From there, I used the snowball sampling strategy to expand my network in order to obtain a sample representative of the social movements of the city. The third challenge concerned the recruiting strategies and specifically the difficulties encountered in making contact with groups and organisations. Recruitment was approached in a similar way as in Milan, mainly through emails or Facebook messages sent to the respective groups' public profiles. In the message, I introduced myself as a PhD student and I explained my interest in their group in relation to my research's goals. However,

in this case, I received a significantly low rate of responses. Against this backdrop, I decided that an alternative and effective recruiting strategy would be to attend their meetings, their public assemblies and protest events. I therefore browsed their Facebook pages searching for their upcoming public initiatives and I met activists directly on site. If these were presentation assemblies, like it happened in the case of Extinction Rebellion, I touched upon my identity during the initial round of presentations just declaring that I was there "dans le cadre d'une recherché academique" for then explaining more in detail my project to the event's organisers at the end. Once on the site, I frequently subscribed to groups' mailing lists, a precious source of information and observation, particularly with regard to the internal organisation of the groups, assignment of tasks among groups' activists and planning of events. Directly approaching activists on site was particularly favoured by Paris contextual conditions. I indeed happened to conduct my fieldwork between January and June 2023 during the protest cycle against the pension reform in France. This was an unexpected advantageous coincidence as the social movement landscape was particularly vibrant and active in the arrangement of multiple arenas of encounter, being them manifest street protests or preparatory political assemblies. During these occasions, I also observed which groups were there and I collected as many leaflets, political declarations and manifestos as I could. These acted as invaluable tools for obtaining information about the signatory actors, which proved to be particularly insightful, especially during the initial phase of fieldwork when I had limited clues about where to begin mapping the most relevant local SMOs. Spaces were key as well in facilitating the snowball sampling. Among them, it should be mentioned A.E.R.I. ("Association humanitaire d'entraide et rencontre à Montreuil" – association of mutual aid and meeting in Montreuil), a common space located in Montreuil shared by different collectives as a base-office where to hold assemblies and to organise social, political, cultural and educational activities according to an agreed calendar. I went to this place under the suggestion of my gatekeeper to meet the BSP of Montreuil who runs there a canteen from recuperated food once a week. AERI defines itself "a real utopia", a place of "creation of struggles", as it reads from a writing on the wall of its entrance. The prefigurative character distinguishing the conception and the management of this place along with its grounding autonomist principles drove my interest in exploring further which collectives revolved it around. It is precisely in this further investigation that I discovered that the group of the Yellow Vests of Montreuil was meeting at AERI twice per week. Given the relevance of the overall Yellow Vests movement in the French social movement landscape over the last four years, I decided to recruit the Yellow Vests of Montreuil as SMOs in representation of the larger Yellow Vests movement. Overall, the research covered the metropolitan areas of Milan and Paris. The choice to extend sampling outside the administrative boundaries of the city to adjacent areas – i.e. Montreuil

in Paris and Cinisello Balsamo in Milan – was driven by the process of snowball sampling itself rather than to motifs related to the research design or theory. For example, despite Collective 20092 being located in Cinisello Balsamo, I decided to include it anyway in my sample as its frequent mention during informal discussions with activists from various collectives suggested its relevance to the social movement scene in the city.

3.3.2 Interviews, questions, Interactions

I conducted a total of 42 interviews over the period May 2022 and June 2023[13]. In social movement research, in-depth interviews are acknowledged as an effective strategy to explore both how activists regard their action and how they understand their social and political context (Blee et al. 2002). In-depth interviews help researchers to understand interviewees' views of processes, norms, decision making, beliefs system. Hence, this method of data collection allowed me to get deep answers to my research question on social movement organisations' change from 'experts' on the issue: activists themselves. It seemed indeed of great relevance to establish a direct conversation with them in order to gain insight both into *how* their organisations had evolved from the pre to the post-pandemic period and *why* they did embark on a specific transformative trajectory. Listening to their words and reconstructions opened ways for me to detect the combination of factors at the base of certain paths of change and to explore what activists considered as Covid-19 long-term legacies and outcomes on their organisations. In coherence with the social constructivist ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this research (see Section 2.1.1), my interest was precisely not singling out 'objective' features of change or 'objective' outcomes of the pandemic-related cycle of contention but rather to get a sense of them through activists' perceptions and interpretations of them. As eminently emphasized by David Meyer (2021), *claiming credit* is strategic in shaping the future of contentious politics. Movements struggle not only for exerting *actual* influence but also for writing a dominant narrative about their trajectory (Polletta, 1998). In telling their story, the choice of the factors to emphasize and of what to narrate as an outcome, regardless of its *effectivity*, works as a legitimizing or delegitimizing dispositive for the possibilities of future collective actions. "The dominant narrative about the trajectory of a movement, or of the origins of a policy, becomes part of the culture in which movements arise (or not), legitimating certain kinds of claims, actors, and tactics, while undermining others" (ibidem). The fact that what activists believe is a *fact* just as much as what 'really' happened (Thompson, 1988) underscores the importance of understanding social movement processes from the point of view of their participants. Through in-depth

[13] The appendix includes a list of interviewees and respective interview dates.

interviews, I could therefore gain insights into individual and collective visions of their organisations' longitudinal change, exploring in particular the nuances of certain features of movements – such as identities – that are not simple reflections of background contexts but rather related to specific moments of social and political activism.

The interviewees *sampling* reflected the underlying question guiding the research and the emergent group-specific understandings acquired in the study. At an initial sampling stage, I selected activists who were present both before and after the Covid-19 emergency. They were necessarily the most knowledgeable about how their group faced and evolved after the pandemic period and were thus theoretically relevant to garner narratives and interpretations on *change*. Consequently, especially for the first interviews with each SMOs, I chose to sample long-time activists, such as founding members who, given their extensive involvement in militancy, could both delve into the basics of the group pertaining its origin, objectives and identity and offer a long-term perspective on its trajectory spanning from the pre-pandemic to the post-pandemic period.

As my insights on the groups under study deepened, I enlarged sampling to two other kinds of interviewees. First, I added movement participants who joined the movement during the pandemic and who sustained their involvement after the end of the emergency. They were chosen to ascertain both how the accounts of respondents with varying levels of activism differed and to explore how those who first got active during the pandemic understood their eventual decision to remain. Second, since in the course of the observation of groups' internal meetings I often encountered differences of opinions and conflicts, when possible I interviewed militants of different movement factions in order to collect evidence of diverse viewpoints, thus breaking down the illusion of collective actors' homogeneity.

All interviews lasted about an hour and were audio recorded with prior consent from participants. The location of interviews coincided in almost all cases either with the activists' natural environment or with a neutral setting, i.e. a location chosen by the interviewees themselves such as the offices of the individual organisations, a library, a bar and so on. While this was the general rule, 5[14] out of the total number of interviews tool place online via Google meet. Online interviews resulted a convenient and cost-effective alternative to compensate for the impossibility to conduct face to face meetings due to practical circumstances or field-related reasons[15]. It should be

[14] These were with five activists from two Milan's social movement organisations: Collective 20092 (4 interviews) and Collective Zam (1 interview).

[15] For example, when I was doing fieldwork in Milan between November and December 2022, Collective 20092 was very busy with the sudden threat of incumbent eviction. This meant that activists did not have lots of extra time to spend

underlined that in all these cases, participants were people I had recruited offline and with whom I had already established a research rapport with during fieldwork. Ultimately, our online interaction was deeply embedded in our offline relationship (Bowker et al., 2004). This helped me to foster an authentic and open dialogue and to avoid the dilemmas typical of online interviews such as verifying the identity of consenting participants in the cyberspace or the building of a rapport and trust (O'Connor et al., 2011).

My *interview strategy* consisted of the elaboration of an interview grid with semi-structured questions, which allowed for a considerable degree of flexibility depending on each participant's responses. An example of my interview grid can be found at the end of the chapter. The interviews were conducted in Italian in Milan and in French in Paris, while grid below is provided in English. Overall, I tried to have a balance between more structured questions that could provide me with topically thick information and less structured questions which favour the generation of new hypotheses and ideas. The overall structured skeleton of my interview was necessary to guarantee that the conversation ultimately touched upon some common macro-points important to answer my research question; at the same time, the specific questions I posed to the different SMOs have been slightly different, posed using different formulas or touching upon specific issues that not necessarily have been matter of discussion with all the interviewees. This happened because the interview segment typically followed an incipient phase of participant observation of the various SMOs. This means that I had already some familiarity with the organisations at hand and at least some field notes on particular dynamics, themes, or aspects that I had noticed as salient during fieldwork and that could possibly be candidates for being addressed in the interview – as for example happened with regard. Moreover, as I did interviews with activists of a specific SMO and hence I accumulated knowledge about the change of that specific organisation, I figured out the topics and questions that were important with regard to change, and I thus was more prone to include them into subsequent rounds of interviews. In addition to biographical data, the interview grid was organised around three thematic blocks reflecting my research questions and theoretical assumptions. These themes are mostly concordant my aim to study post-pandemic change:

a) the first thematic block was devoted to capture the status quo of the social movement organisation before the pandemic. It required the participants to reflect on their own experience as activists, including the reasons and motivations that brought them to engage in that specific organisation; in the case of the interviewee being a founding member of the group, I asked also about the origin and the motivation for the creation of the group, as well

on outside researchers. As a result, they were not able to grant me interviews in good time before my departure from the field. This is why we agreed to schedule them online at their earliest convenience.

as its objectives; lastly, examples of concrete activities were requested to elicit insights into forms of actions.

b) The second thematic chunk focused on the contentious agency during the pandemic phase. Questions required the participants to reflect on their actions during the pandemic, the reasons behind the choice to undertake some forms of action as well as their meaning beyond their concrete aim. Question posing required some adjustment in the interview grid depending on whether I was interviewing members of organisations that mobilized or that did not mobilize at all during the lockdown and beyond. For example, when I was interviewing members of the Brigades in Milan I included questions like: was the decision of creating the Brigade consensual within the group? Did you collaborate with NGOs or institutional actors? Why? Were there discussions in the group regarding the opportunity to cooperate with more institutional agents? Answers to these questions were particularly important to illuminate the different meanings, motivations and organizational arrangements underpinning the same actions, which would potentially explain, according to my assumptions, the varying long-term impact of the same action on different groups. Irrespective of groups mobilising or not during the pandemic, I asked all the interviewees to reflect both how they interpreted the pandemic at collective level as well as their opinion on the national policies to contain it.

c) The third thematic cluster was dedicated to the post-pandemic period. Choosing this bloc's question wording was particularly challenging. Indeed, my aim was to elicit reflections on the impact of the pandemic on different aspects of social movements organisations but without engaging with scholarly terminology such as 'strategy' or 'collective identity'. I therefore preferred to have it in the very open form of "according to you, what has been the biggest impact of the pandemic on your organisation?" for then following-up more narrowly according to the answer given by the respondent. In this case as well, I foresaw certain questions to SMOs that engaged in direct social actions during the Covid-19 pandemic, as I was eager to assess the extent to which this factor influenced the organization's overall longitudinal change.

As for the research purpose of this study, as illustrated by the interview grid, most of the interviews involved some degree of retrospection. Retrospective interviewing deserves some space for reflection, as it offered many possibilities and posed some challenges into my data collection and analysis. Retrospective methods are employed "to measure and understand change and to include a time dimension to the data that can be used to identify causal factors contributing to any observed change" (de Vaus, 2011). According to de Vaus, the reconstruction of processes, events and,

ultimately, causal links is only possible when the researcher manages to adequately put together the past. In this light, retrospective interviews are particularly susceptible to "faulty memory" (ibid). Over the course of my fieldwork, I came to identify several occasions whereby my interlocutors were either misrecollecting certain issues and events or were altogether forgetting about them. For example, some interviewees enchained with a surprising lucidity dates and sequence of events while others had memory lapses, misordered events or evocated issues just partially. The ensuing picture of an organisation's activity in the past resulted thus slightly different according to the person I talked to. For the memory effort required, such incidents were particularly prominent in questions pertaining to the pre-pandemic phase and to the first year of the pandemic, 2020. Upon reflection during data analysis, it became evident that, in numerous instances, those lapses in memory conveyed more significance than they imposed silence. To be more precise, I came to understand that, more often than not, these occurrences indicated either the heightened significance of the period for the individuals involved or changes in the prominence of specific issues, practices, and/or events.

3.3.3 Participant observation

Suitable for being extensively used in ethnographic studies or only partially during fieldwork initial stages, literature agrees on participant observation as a crucial method to *really* understand a social situation (Melucci, 1996). While acting and being part of the same situation of people under study has per se an heuristic value, this has specific advantages when it comes to the study of social movements. Deep diving into the *mis-en-scene* of a public image, shedding light on the strategic and decision-making aspects outside the light cone of movements' public stances as well as opening the black box of organisations are all aspects participant observation of social movements' activity (Balsiger et al., 2014). In this project, I engaged in participant observation during initial fieldwork stages in Milan and Paris, as a means to get in touch with activists and to familiarise with everyday groups' life, including their activities, practices and attached meanings. Occasions of observation included everyday activities, regular meetings, public initiatives, contentious actions and direct social actions. I shifted my position within the poles participant-as-observer and complete participant (Gold, 1958) over the course of fieldwork according to what I deemed the best researchers' "hat" in specific sites. During internal meetings, I tended to act as a complete observer while engaging as a helping hand during concrete actions (such as helping out with leafleting with 18eme en lutte in Paris) was a vantage point to talk to many of the activists and to set the context for interviews. This allowed me to juggle between not participating too much, thus avoiding the risk of exerting too much influence on what was observed, and not keeping too much such social

distance, which would prevent me from acquiring valuable sources of understanding. Participant observation was a window to immerse in the field and to fully grasp non-public aspects pertaining the groups I was studying such as, issue-priority negotiation and within-group cleavages. It also allowed me to make sense of the outreach of their action and to pay attention to which people talked, what they said and how did they say it. Overall, observing SMOs' everyday life in the making uncovered how groups shaped themselves according to the situation. To this regard, Lichtermann (2002) underlined that participant observing shows us "how definitions of situations shape groups". While this is undoubtedly true, I would also add that participant observing elucidated also the other way around, namely how SMOs shaped the definition of the situations, which made this method a reservoir of evidence to grasp groups' identity. I decided to follow an approach that included both theory-driven and field-driven participant observation. I entered the field informed by the very general theme of "change" I knew about through pre-existing evidence and concepts. I thus brought to the field some previously established theoretical ideas and assumptions, at the same time expecting to generate and substantiate new intuitions and hypotheses according to contingencies of fieldwork. I did not have a clearly structured template for observation, but a rather short list of broad dimensions to pay attention to, such as identity-construction, interactions and mentions of other groups to reconstruct the network of relations. As part of the data collected during participant observation, I tried, whenever possible, to survey activists during their outreach activities like direct social actions, demonstrations and/or related events. My strategy involved identifying members, sympathisers or volunteers who were willing to answer brief questions concerning their presence and experience. Questions revolved around reasons for demonstrating or engaging with a specific activity, background information on the roots of their activism with that specific group and political stances being publicised at the protest event or embedded in particular forms of action. Although I could not record them as full interviews, it nonetheless gave me the opportunity to gather data in the form of field notes. This method was especially powerful to glean the everyday meanings and tacit assumptions that organize groups lives and that are harder to derive using interview methods. Observing the group's position in the setting of a larger street protest event, the different commitment styles of its activists as well as diverging positions on what it means to be effective were all avenues for picking up activists' understanding of their world in their own terms. For example, participant observing an internal assembly of Collective Zam on the mounting of a crowdfunding campaign elucidated activists' different interpretations of how contentiousness evolved overtime. Below is an excerpt from my field notes during that day:

Activists discussed around the text of a crowdfunding campaign for covering the legal expenses for the condemnations linked to the anti-eviction mobilisations of the "old Zam". They discussed how to plan the campaign and its contents. They talked about the necessity to construct comprehensive political discourses and someone proposed to focus on how Zam interpreted conflict in the city of Milan over the last ten years. This triggered a debate on whether conflict decreased or not. Someone highlighted that conflict is ever present in society and, if not acted, it is then suffered. This person stressed that Zam acts conflict at internal level but it is not able to take it outside. Others stressed that conflict is present, in other and less conflictual forms but it is there. It is recalled that in the past Zam took the decision to invest in conflict for not only the sake to act it, but with the aim to make the social fabric permeable to its forms of conflict. Along this line, insistence was placed on the similarity between contentious demonstrations and a social dinner as forms of contentious action. Acting conflict now comes out as a test to see whether years of construction of the community worked.

(Fieldwork diary, 28/11/2022)

This short passage clarifies the added valued of participant observation to delve into the heterogeneous meanings regarding what has been done and is being done by a collective actor. In the case at hand, more specifically, acknowledging the contested understanding of the issue of conflict – *what does it mean to be contentious today? how the way we are contentious has changed over the last ten years?* - was key to grasp the nuances regarding group's collective identity. It also brought to the surface the contrasting terms with which activists understand engaging in conflict today as compared to the past. The discussion regarding this latter aspect further feed my expectation that the evolution of social movements is not a monolithic process, but rather a narrative that can vary depending on the perspective of the storyteller.

Field sites comprised both offline and virtual environments. It should be clarified that this choice was not driven by the goal to understand the online space in its own terms, that is to grasp how activists engaged with it or to understand the development of online distinctive cultures. Digital spaces were not treated as research objects in their own but as entry points to complement evidence collected by offline observation. Within offline contexts, indeed, I frequently found myself observing activists interacting and drawing on their online experiences, for example making reference to group discussions that took place on Telegram or Signal's internal groups. Therefore, the need to move away from conventional place-based study to online fieldwork stemmed from the empirical awareness of online activities as embedded within the offline side of groups' everyday life (Hine, 2017). As eminently expressed by Atkinson (Atkinson 2015), fieldwork brought the field into being. This resonates with discussions on the blurring contours of the notion of 'field site' itself. Indeed, while in its early days scholars tended to observe online communication as an independent sphere, detached from the offline context, in recent years the idea of stable connections

between the two has clearly prevailed. In particular, the increasing blending of online and offline lives into an inseparable mesh of connections made field sites not easily locatable either online or offline (Garcia et al. 2009). In the field of social movements, the need to account for this challenge laid grounds for ethnographies sharing the analysis of both online and offline milieus of actions but differing per aim of observation. For example, Juris (2008) looked at emails, web pages, and free software as tools used by Global Justice Movement's activists for organizational purposes. Postill and Pink (2012) explored messy webs of interconnection of the 15M movement in Spain across online and offline space while Cernison (2019) reconstructed the connections between online and offline activism of the public water movement.

The physical sites included the organizations' offices as well as public locations where both routine activities and contentious events occurred. The virtual sites encompassed digital platforms used by actors to represent themselves to the outside, as in the case of their social media profiles, and online communication channels for internal organisational purposes. With regard to these latter, subscribing to actors' mailing lists and entering their internal communication platforms such as Telegram or Mattermost groups helped me to observe activists' communication exchanges with each other, including topics of discussion, within-group organisational dynamics, as well as revealing the composition and extension of the movements' networks. Ultimately, doing participant observation was also instrumentally strategic to blend with activists, which had two important consequences for the subsequent interview phase of data collection. First, participating in movements' activities allowed me to be frequently seen by participants. Becoming a stable presence accepted by the group provided me with a capital of trust that facilitated recruiting participants for interviews. This effect reverberated also at personal level: having spent time with activists made it easier for me to ask them to give time for my investigation through individual interviews. As such, it helped me to address the ethical issue of "research extractivism", that is the risk to be perceived by activists as a sterile extractor of information, who comes and leaves the scene just for exploiting the site's data collection potential. Observing their internal assemblies and 'getting my hands dirty' in a myriads of concrete actions e.g. helping in food preparation at the canteen of the Yellow Vests in Paris or in meal distribution in the centre of Milan with the Collective Lambretta were all ways to be perceived as an insider and to also 'give something back' to activists, ultimately preventing them from the risk of deception. Second, field notes played a crucial role in helping me to identify important concepts related to the identity of groups, their claims, and internal dynamics. Eventually, they provided a guide for more focused next field sessions and the potential for deeper exploration during later interviews.

3.3.4 Online and Offline materials

The inclusion of materials produced by activists was meant to engage with multi-sited, offline/online observations in order to shed light on actors' claims, actions and identity.. From a methodological perspective, it worked as an instrument for triangulation, serving as a complementary support to interviews and participant observation. Moreover, it would have been problematic to eschew the analysis of movements' documents and, in particular, of material published online, from the data collected for two reasons. First, given the concern of this work for the post-Covid emergency change of social movement organisations, online and offline contents were a reservoir of evidence on actors' pre-2020 phase. The timing of the project's start (2021), indeed, made it impossible to conduct interviews with activists before and after the pandemic. In addition to printed materials produced by SMOs - when available - like flyers, signs, banners and posters, I considered also online material. Digital media including alternative ones – e.g., in my case, the website Milanoinmovimento.it and Parislutte.info - as well as social media are notoriously spaces in which movement organizations represent themselves in public (Mattoni 2012, 2016; Kavada et al. 2023; Bennett and Segerberg 2012). Hence, materials gathered there were relevant to understand how social movement actors symbolically represented themselves before the pandemic, and presented their interpretation of their allies, targets as well as their position in the social and political struggle. Frequently, I collected printed materials prior to conduct interviews and I showed them to my respondents in order to elicit reflections on groups' actions, ideologies and strategies and their evolution. Second, my concern into post-pandemic change made the study of online material crucial since the digital space was a main - though not exclusive - arena for contentious politics during the lockdown months. The frames employed, the claims made and the themes possibly brought to the public attention during the intense lockdown months illustrated actors' positions within the broader political arena with regard to the emergency policy management at national level.

In terms of data sources and collection methods, I physically gathered materials produced by activists during fieldwork, such as programmatic manifestoes, call to actions, leaflets and booklets containing their political analyses. When copies of those materials were not available, I personally took pictures of those that I considered relevant for my understanding of the group under study. Examples entailed documents compiled by activists concerning core concepts for their identity or internal organizational rules, programmatic manifestos and. I included also pictures taken by me of the venue of social movement organisations especially where posters or billboards were hung up and could not be collected otherwise. Although not applying visual analysis, I also included in my data set visuals produced by me in the form of pictures taken during participant observation.

Following Doerr and colleagues (2014), I refer to visuals as 'simple formations of meanings that might evoke specific imaginaries through posters, pictures, photos, videos, etc'.Thus, I treat them as only another window into actors' identity and ideological underpinnings.

3.3.5 Data analysis

Thematic analysis has been used to search for patterned responses in relation to my research questions (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2013, 2017, 2021a, 2021b, 2022, 2023). This method was chosen because it could highlight similarities and differences across the data set – which match my comparative design both among SMOs and between countries – and for its flexibility. Furthermore, unlike other pattern-type analysis methods – such as grounded theory and Interpretative phenomenological analysis –, thematic analysis does not subscribe implicitly to specific paradigms but can be combined with a variety of theoretical assumptions. Notwithstanding this, taking up Braun and Clarke's call (2006) for an outspoken and transparent account of the epistemological position adopted, I conducted thematic analysis within a constructionist framework. This implied that I was sensitive to theorise the socio-cultural contexts and the structural conditions that enabled the accounts and meanings provided in the data. All in all, as recalled throughout the chapter, my research focus was underpinned by an understanding of meso-level change and, more broadly, of Covid-19 impact, as *made sense of* and understood by activists. I do not subscribe to a somewhat naïve language of themes being "discovered" or "emerging" or of analysis as the result of a *voice giving* to participants (Fine 2002). This kind of language, indeed, as Ely et al. (1997) have stressed, wrongly conveys the idea that themes reside in the data, while "if themes „reside" anywhere, they reside in our heads from our thinking about our data and creating links as we understand them" (p. 205-6). As a researcher, I rather recognise my active role in identifying patterns/themes, selecting which were of interest, and reporting them to the readers. For example, having embraced a mechanism-based account of the process of social movement organizations change, I was keen on identifying the Covid-related mechanisms moving from the distinction by McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001) et al. between relational, cognitive and environmental mechanisms. Accordingly, I identified meso-level Covid induced changes at the realms of social relations, cognition and the environment. During analysis, I recognised the relevance of the affective dimension in influencing change dynamics. I hence decided to follow this path and to code also what I then referred to as "emotional mechanisms".

Themes were identified first in an inductive or bottom-up way (Patton 1990) and then in a more deductive way (Boyatzis 1998). The first round of coding concerned data collected in Milan during the exploratory fieldwork phase. This was more data-driven – consistently with my initial broad

research question – and it was precisely the themes identified during this initial coding process that drove the evolution of the specific research question. The second round of coding was more theoretical and deductive. This does not mean that I tried to fit it into a pre-existing coding frame yet I coded for a quite specific research question – understanding trajectories of post-Covid change – which maps onto the more theoretical approach. For example, engagement with literature on Covid impact on contentious politics shaped the analysis by sensitising me to more subtle features of the data - that is, I was analytically attuned to potential sites of change such as repertoire of action or organization which I knew from literature had been impacted by the pandemic context. There were hence some ideas that drove the analysis and the ensuing themes included, spoke to and expanded on something previous literature had suggested. In accordance with the social constructive premises of this research, themes were identified at interpretative level (Boyatzis 1998). That is to say, analysis aimed at going beyond the semantic content of the data, to examine underlying ideas, assumptions and conceptualisations that were informing the semantic content of the data. Braun and Clarke (2006) identified six phases of the analysis process I am to use to illustrate how I conducted it. It is important to note that analysis was not a linear process where I simply moved from one phase to the next. It was a recursive process, where I moved back and forth as needed, throughout the following phases:

Phase 1. Familiarisation with data

Since the bulk of data was collected through interactive means, I came to the analysis with some prior knowledge of the evidence and some initial analytic interests and impressions on what the data meant I kept record of through memo writing. Then, I immersed myself in the data in order to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the content. Interviews transcription and fieldwork journal writing were constitutive steps of this phase (Riessman 2002). Rather than working as a mechanical act, transcription informed the early stages of analysis per se as it enabled a far more thorough understanding of my data, it facilitated the close-reading and interpretative skills needed to analyse them. Then, I repeatedly read my dataset in an active way, searching for meanings and patterns. During this phase, I started to take notes and marked ideas for coding.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes

After having read and familiarised myself with the data and have generated an initial list of ideas about what was in them, I produced initial codes from them. Mind that my initial research question

was on social justice making from below: the first dataset from Milan was coded hence with the idea of highlighting the features of the data that appeared interesting in this regard. The second and proper round of coding, applied to the entire Italian and French dataset reflected the change in research question. I proceeded with inductive coding thus without a pre-existing coding frame; though, I was guided by some questions. Since my interviews were organised around three blocks of questions, longitudinally corresponding to the pre-pandemic, pandemic phase and post-pandemic phase, coding has been applied to keep track of the evolution of the answers to different "how-possible questions" throughout the three blocks. These entailed how movement organizations attached meaning to action, to their strategy, to the objectives of the SMO, which kind of understandings emerged of the national socio-political context, which were the allies, targets and opponents, how the "we" was constructed against the opponents. Interrogating the data through these questions allowed me to make sense of the features characterising the specific SMOs under study and their evolution overtime. Therefore, I first coded and collated all data by identifying SMO-specific interesting features related to pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic phase. I used Nvivo and proceeded to code case by case. For example, I coded all the interviews pertaining to the Yellow Vests and then I divided the resulting codes into three blocs according to the 'temporality' each of them belonged: pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic phase. Then, focusing more specifically on the post-pandemic phase, I collated codes by singling out the broader dimensions of change they were pointing at. Again, in the case of the Yellow Vests, there were a number of very descriptive codes on their increased entrenchment with the struggles and collective groups at AERI level. I collated these codes by identifying "rooting and networking" as an instance of change. As coding process progressed, and as I was starting developing my writing and having a clearer ideas of the themes and of the shape of the results I wanted to achieve, I continued coding interviews by narrowing my attention to the pandemic and the post-pandemic period. At that point, I directly assigned the coding formula "Covid made us…" where data were pointing to some Covid-induced change. Of course, this was a skill I developed at a later stage of the process, as knowledge of data increased and as I started having a clearer idea of possible patterns.

Phase 3: Sorting codes into themes

At the end of the previous phase, I had come up with a rather flat descriptive account of actor-specific trajectories that seemed providing no hints for a bigger cross-case story behind. What was the higher relevance of those case-specific data? The third phase was hence devoted to collating all the relevant coded data extracts within potential themes. Specifically, I tried to go at a higher level of abstraction by considering how long lists of case specific codes may combine to form

overarching themes corresponding to patterns of post-Covid change. During this phase, I realised that codes were pointing to two different aspects of change. On the one hand, the *facies* of change, that is the cross-cases patterns of the "what" of change. On the other, the factors underpinning them, that is the "how" of actor-specific trajectories of change. There were indeed cross-cases themes such as "Covid gave us time" or "Covid created cleavages" which did not necessarily indicate medium-term change per se but nonetheless highlighted an analytically interesting dynamic underneath Covid-related transformation. I hence ended this phase with a collection of candidate themes corresponding to "patterns" and "factors" including all extracts of data that have been coded in relation to them.

Phase 4: reviewing themes

At this point, I had still a fragmented account of my story. I first therefore re-read all the data, codes and case-specific themes to find the thread *what was going on* comparatively. Second, I started reading literature on processual approaches to contentious episodes (e.g. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001Alimi, Bosi, and Demetriou 2015) and I decided to refine what in the previous phase I had labelled as Covid-factors or Covid-related produced or subtracted resources to bring into the discussion mechanisms. I hence reviewed themes by distinguishing between Covid-induced mechanisms cross-cutting cases – with the above mentioned distinction into environmental, relational and cognitive ones plus an attention to affective dynamics as well – singling out three processes of change: 1) unmaking and making of collective identity 2) transforming organization 3) breaking movements' momentum. However, while checking in themes' working in relation to the entire dataset, especially of patterns' constituting mechanisms, I decided to recode by nuancing the distinction between mechanisms and constituting sub-mechanisms and to distinguish between emergency and post-emergency mechanisms to give account of the shift in temporality which had acquired analytical relevance to my research question. In this way, I paid attention to the patterned sequences of mechanisms, and I used them as cross-cutting criteria of comparison among cases. Finally, after an ultimate review of the coding, I realised that my coding was still too dense. Hence, I decided not to divide into the three processes of change as detailed above but to proceed with a unique process of change, the process of social movement organizations' transformation. The 3 processes identified above became hence mechanisms sustaining an overall, general process of change. After assessing themes working in relation to the recoded extracts and the entire dataset, I stopped recoding. At the end of this phase, I had a fairly good idea of what my different themes were, of how sub-mechanisms, mechanisms and constituted patterns fir together, meaning the overall story they told about the data.

Phase 5: defining and naming themes

At this point, I proceeded with "define and refine" the essence of what each theme was about and determining what aspect of the data each theme captured. Specifically, I went back to collated data extract for each pattern and each mechanism and organised them into a coherent and internally consistent account with accompanying narrative. For each of them, I wrote a detailed analysing and I identified the story each of them told in the context of the broader overall 'story' I was reconstructing.

Phase 6: producing the report

To give an idea of the iterative phase of data analysis, the report coming out of analysis was produced and reproduced multiple times as writing and analysis progressed in tandem. Early versions of my empirical chapters, "the reports" of thematic analysis at the time, reflected an analysis still at an embryonic phase. They consisted indeed in a very descriptive case-by case analytical report of actors' medium-term changes, without cross-cutting dimensions of analysis and devoid of a broader overarching narrative. The proper final report writing began when I had fully worked-out patterns with specific mechanisms. I illustrated patterns of change by providing vivid examples and extracts which capture the essence of the point I was demonstrating. The extracts were chosen as to be easily identifiable as examples of the patterns and mechanisms. They were as well embedded within a beyond-data analytic narrative that compelling illustrated the story that I wanted to tell about my data while engaging with the research questions and the literature.

3.4 Validity: triangulation, positionality and ethical considerations

Triangulation, understood as "a process of verification that increases validity by incorporating several view points and methods" (Yeasmin and Rahman 2012:156) functions as a strategy to validity and credibility in qualitative research (Nowell et al. 2017). In this project, as reconstructed in the previous section, triangulation was employed by combining different data sources and methods of collection. From an interpretivist perspective, this enables the researcher to explore different aspects of the same phenomena (della Porta and Keating 2008) while overcoming the biases inherent in a single method or data source study. Triangulation enhances the robustness of evidence thus making the case for a deeper understanding and more sound explanation more likely. The quest for a scientifically trustworthy discourse in this research typically required me to keep a

self-critical account of the research process. This includes a reflexive explicit gaze on my subjective experience of the field, on the pre-existing thoughts beliefs that informed my analysis as well as on ethical issue concerning access, acceptance and permission.

One of the main ethical issues I faced in conducting this project was the when and how to seek permission from groups to study them. While this is a typical issue in field research, it comes with specific challenges when the object of study is a social movement. These include the logistical and political inconvenience a participant observer may pose for a movement and the threat of surveillance. At the same time, disclosing researchers' identity may jeopardise movements' spontaneous behaviours and thus influence the authenticity of the data that the researcher might be able to grasp through immersive research. The issue was made even more complex in this project as I did not have specific groups in mind when I entered the field. I had only a loosely defined idea of my unit of analysis which drove me into a month long exploratory mapping phase both in Paris and in Milan. When I entered a movement site to get to know potentially interesting movement groups by participating in their open assemblies or public initiatives, I did not always have in mind the goal of studying them from the start. As a consequence, there were few cases in which either I did an exploratory visit to a site while remaining incognito as a researcher or I revealed it while already in the field – e.g. during rounds of presentations in the case of open assemblies. In the former case, if I eventually decided to sample the actors as cases, I found myself to struggling to seek out a subsequent good moment to reveal my research hopes without being reacted at by surprise, which would prompt immobilizing fear among activist. Of course, I acknowledge that this also raises the question of the ethical acceptability for a researcher to enter a community without explaining her purposes from the outset. However, I must emphasize that the few meetings I participated without disclosing my identity were public assemblies at end of which I approached the group leader - or activists that had been more talkative - to ask for the group's permission to continue participating with a researchers' hat on. Overall, the researcher-social movement relationship fundamentally builds upon the bargain on clearly stated research objectives and methods. It is then up to social movement actors to negotiate among themselves what to openly uncover and what to hide to the wider public world. As an illustration, there has been an instance when Collective Zam requested me to refrain from attending their weekly assemblies due to their discussion of radical actions. Nevertheless, this act was a data in itself for me and I took notice of it in the form of a field note. Research material is not just about what movements do or say, but concerns also the silences and the boundaries they establish to protect themselves.

I always felt welcomed by all the groups I studied. Almost all of them had already previous experiences with research and this made their decision to accommodate my interest to study a very smooth process. Moreover, to present myself as a researcher helped to foster a common identity with candidates who granted me access. I assume this was the case for two reasons. On the one hand, in the case activists were or had been themselves university students, it was easy for them to sympathise with my situation and to accept my 'interested' presence among them. On the other hand, my identity as a precarious PhD student made them perceive me as one of them, as part of an ideal same struggle. Additionally, my position as a white, educated, middle-class woman fostered social proximity with most of the activists – in the most cases, individuals between their 20s and 40s - which constituted an advantage in many ways. I always provided participants with clues about my life as part of the effort to position myself in the field and create a bond with people. Activists were very curious to know if I had an activist background in Italy and, in general, showed interest in how I came up with my research topic. Telling them about my previous involvement in Libera, an Italian antimafia NGO, or, when in France, underlining my previous phase of fieldwork in Milan with other groups of the same social movement milieu was a stepping stone into enhancing rapport, empathy and trust. Glaring in this sense, for example, was my decision to purposefully inform the BSP in Paris, during our first meeting, of my prior study of the BVE in Milan, whose setting up I knew inspired the very creation of the French counterparts. Likewise, during an internal assembly of the Yellow Vests in Paris, I was solicited to share with the entire group my participation in the anti-mafia camps organized by Libera. Activists appeared very fascinated by the hybrid nature of the association halfway between militancy and institutionalisation and this triggered a discussion about relatable examples in the French milieu. Overall, my experience with progressive activism both at the level of personal militancy and at the level of research constituted a capital I exploited to convey a image of me as an ally.

As far as positionality is concerned, juggling into the liminalities between my insider/outsider role, depending on the type of event I was attending or setting I found myself in, allowed me to maintain the analytic distance necessary to recognise puzzling facts and to escape the risk off over identification with the movements I studied. Although I personally aligned with the leftist/progressive cause that these SMOs advocated for, I did not have a strong sympathy or closeness to any particular group under study. This has allowed me to maintain an analytical perspective, avoiding the assumption that my alignment with their political beliefs automatically translated into a complete understanding of their actions. In my experience, the mental and social distance created by wearing a researcher's hat was welcomed as a space for reflection by group

members themselves. On occasion, participants questioned me about my own views on topics raised during assemblies and they were very curious about the notes I took during their internal meetings. Moreover, I would like to draw the attention to the reality that my own position changed according to the person I was interviewing. Given that for this research I did not deal with a specific sociodemographic group but with different SMOs whose activists varied in terms of age, socioeconomic background and level of education, I had to adjust my position to account for this heterogeneity. In particular, although I never felt in a position of power during interviews, actively engaging in conversations rather than passively asking questions and collecting answers, I recognise that inequalities may have arisen between participants and myself according to the educational level of the respondent. Since my criteria for selecting interviewees dealt with people's level of activism and not with their personal characteristics, I found myself to confront with people varying per per depth of analytical capacity. This is to say that I was careful to adjust my interview questions in order to make them straightforward and easy, with specific regard to the use I was making of theoretical categories such as "collective identity" or "strategy". Far from being a patronizing practice, this was an effective way to minimize the intimidation that research may sometimes evoke. At the same time, it allowed me to engage with the endeavour of making my questions more accessible, understandable and thus more likely not to generate failed interviews. Notwithstanding that, I cannot assume that this was a sufficient means to create a relaxed setting between me and all the interviewees. Many times, I was specifically addressed to talk to certain activists for their "analytical capacity" in a sort of biased internal self-selection of those who would be the best informants for my research purposes. In contrast to this, I acknowledge instead the richness and variety of interactions I had with activists from different backgrounds, beliefs and personal paths and the role this necessarily had in shaping my personal views and conceptions within the research process.

As a distinctive part of ethics, informed consent was gathered prior to interviews via participants' signature of a form written in Italian or French according to the field. The document gave information on the objective of the research, data storing, treatment and research results diffusion as well as on issues of confidentiality. Before the signature, the terms of the research were reiterated as separate bullet points with each of which the person was asked to agree. Between the provision of information and obtaining consent, participants were given a reasonable amount of time to read the sheet and to ask questions. There was one case in which I obtained oral consent but without concrete evidence of it. Indeed, the interviewee in case did not agree to sign the paper consent form nor to be audio recorded – thus hampering oral consent gathering procedures, that normally require the recording of the consent process. Informed consent gathering was particularly challenging for

online interviews as well. Although before the interview I sent an email with the Google meet link to connect to and with the informed consent form attached, almost all the interviewees forgot to send it back to me in time for the interview. This put me in the uncomfortable position of having to solicit them with many follow-up emails also weeks after the interview to gather the form signed.
A last issue it is worth considering concerns the politics and practicalities of leaving the field. This has to do with the methodological importance of how to exit the scene taking into consideration the implications this might have for participants. As I had anticipated above, avoiding the risk of data "spoliation" was a central concern in managing this phase. I tried to minimize it by cultivating connections with activist and regularly keeping them informed about the progress of my fieldwork, including making them aware when my research relationship with them was coming to a close. However, field reasons made it challenging for me to establish clear boundaries between the phase of involvement and the process of exiting. Indeed, having to immerse with more groups simultaneously, it was often complex to cross their agendas. Sometimes, I had to make choices based on fieldwork status and convenience. For example, Monday nights were weekly assembly nights for almost all the groups I sampled. I therefore decided to attend the assemblies of one SMO for one month, for then dedicating the Monday nights of the following months to other groups. As a result, I frequently found myself in a situation whereby I had to stop attending a group's weekly assemblies even though my overall investigation on it was not necessarily finished. I typically continued my involvement by covering other events such as helping out leafleting, participating in marches and scheduling interviews. However, I have to recognise that this dynamic fuelled a fragmented participation rather than a constant structural one and be aware of how this could have impacted the research process.

3.5 Conclusions

This chapter addressed the research design and the overall methodological aspects of this thesis. This PhD project was qualitative in nature and departed from social constructionist premises. Its analytical focus, social movement organisations' change, was approached indeed as understood and made sense of by activists. In line with the recursive and iterative nature of qualitative research, the research questions were pinned down after a first round of fieldwork around a first, very broad analytical interest on the social justice making from below. My research strategy was inductive though I entered the field sensitive to some expectations deriving from literature on the impact of Covid-19 on contentious politics. I chose a case-based comparative research design as it best suited my research aim to uncover patterns of change across progressive social movement organisations in different contexts. On the one hand, France and Italy were selected as countries to compare for their

similarities in terms of the rising of political backlash over recent years and their having being severely impacted by the pandemic. A the same time, they also contrast as per the protest potential, with French citizens being historically more street-leaning (Giugni and Grasso 2019). On the other hand, Milan and Paris were opted for as they are two metropolitan and rich cities, at the centre of processes of financialization and globalisation and with a very vivid social movement scene. Milan, moreover, is the provincial capital of Lombardy region, which stood out during Covid for the high number of death rates and an overall Covid health crisis mismanagement. Case selection was field-driven yet guided a series of criteria concerning the mobilisation issue, type of movement – national, international and local – and activity time, privileging those pre-existing movement organizations who had been particularly active before Covid. Data collection took place via interviews, participant observation and collection of documents produced by activists. This material was analysed via a thematic analysis geared to disentangle patterns of post-Covid change and relative underlying mechanisms. Finally, issues on positionality as insider/outsider, typical of immersive research with social movements, concerns with the timing of informed consent requests as well as dilemmas on the strategic 'degree of disclosing' as a researcher were all parts of the ethical issues addressed during this research.

CHAPTER 4

Italy and France: political landscape, the pandemic and progressive social movements

4.1 Introduction

Social movements do not emerge in a vacuum but are inserted in multifaceted contexts that influence their ebbs and flows. Opportunities and challenges for contention in stable political regimes – as Italy and France are – are influenced by a multilevel – national, regional and local - set of environmental factors and their variations overtime. Building on this well-known tenet from the literature, in this chapter I present Italy and France as meaningful countries for the analysis of *progressive* social movement (PSM) organisations' trajectories beyond the pandemic. As pointed out in Chapter 1, exploring processes of actors' transformation at meso-level implies inserting organizations in a dynamic relationship with the context they interact with. At the same time, the contexts under scrutiny are in evolution themselves, whereby challenges and opportunities for PSM organisations must be analysed against a longitudinal analysis of the countries' socio-political situations at the dawn of the pandemic and during it. Which kind of *structural* constraints and opportunities do Italy and France overall offer for progressive social movement mobilisations? What about the *contingent* challenges and opportunities right before the pandemic outbreak? This chapter takes up these questions and illuminates the salient stable and contingent characteristics which characterized the background against which movement organizations at the centre of this study faced. In particular, given the focus of this work on pre-post Covid processes of change, it is necessary to combine a broader and narrower perspective. The first one implies a scrutiny of the general characteristics of the political context, while the second entails a grasp on how the context, not exclusively political, changed during Covid-19. As an emergency, indeed, Covid management implied the adoption of exceptional measures which put on hold democratic accountabilities and affected both civil and social rights, constraining freedom and magnifying the effects of unequal distribution of resources, with far-reaching consequences for the overall quality of democracy. All this has undoubtedly affected prospects of contentious politics evolution and hence shall be given a thorough account of.

Consistently with the above outlined approach, the chapter is structured as follows. Section 4.2 delves into the political context of both cases, presenting first the institutional features of France and Italy (4.2.1) and then reconstructing party-system alignments (4.1.2). The latter is necessary to emphasize how the de-structuration of traditional political competition scheme over recent years

and ensuing the rise of challengers created space for a new progressive-backlash cleavage, making Italy and France salient countries for the analysis of progressive agency. After having set broader national stages, Section 4.3 addresses pandemic management at national (4.3.1) and local level (4.3.2). This section enters in how contextual features including but not limited to politics transformed during Covid-19 emergency. The focus at local level, moreover, paves the way for the comparative presentation of the two urban scenarios, Milan and Paris. Finally, Section 4.4 reconstructs the key features and facts regarding France and Italy social movement structures and agency tradition (4.4.1), including their relationship with parties (4.4.2), a review necessary to lay the foundation for subsequently understanding who are the actors at the centre of this work and where they come from (Chapter 5).

4.2 Italy and France: the general political setting

4.2.1 Institutional setting

To look inside the country's political opportunity structure (POS), I follow Kriesi's conceptualisation (1991) of POS into three broad sets of properties of a political system: (1) its formal structure, (2) its informal procedures and prevailing strategies with regard to challengers and (3) the configuration of power relevant for confrontation with the challengers. I will first focus on the first two properties. Specific attention will be devoted to the third aspect - the configuration of power – in the next subsection (4.2.2). This latter dimensions concerns indeed party system alignments, which are more permeable to contingent change and thus will be put under scrutiny with regard to the period under consideration.

As far as the institutional setting is concerned, France is a strong state, closed and having a high capacity to impose itself (Kriesi et al. 1992). A semi-presidential republic with a highly centralized institutional power, a strong executive and limited power for local institutions (Kriesi et al., 1995), France stands out as a paradigmatic case of a closed polity, which combines all the obstacles to the influence of social movements (Kriesi 2004). With respect to challengers, it is marked by a long-run exclusive strategy, that is, a repressive, confrontational and polarising attitude toward them – i.e, historically exerted over the labour movement (Gallie 1983). The combination of a strong state with an exclusive dominant strategy makes France representative of a situation of *full exclusion*. In such a situation, challengers can count on neither formal nor informal access to the political system; the strong state largely ignores them or, if it reacts, "it will most likely confront the challenger with repression" (Kriesi et al 1991). Such a context has historically perpetuated a culture of conflict (Hoffman et al. 1963), inviting disruptive strategies on the part of movements. To this regard, Wilson (1987) observed that the strength of the French state gives rise to "its greatest weakness".

Unable to allow challengers to articulate their concerns through formal or informal channels of access, and with a traditionally strongly repressive policing tradition (Cretteziez and Sommier, 2012), France has been periodically confronted by large scale explosion of discontent. Contention has traditionally targeted the national level – as a result of the highly centralised character of the country – and has been marked by the frequent resort to political violence (Sommier, Crettiez, and Audiger 2021) by a variety of groups within the political spectrum[16].

Italy, on the other hand, is a parliamentary republic. Contrary to France, the openness of its political system to challengers is more complex and dynamic, varying depending on the specific time period under consideration, with attitudes being collaborative or confrontational according to the presence of allies and opponents in power (Della Porta and Rucht 1995). Italy is often called an anomaly (Osterwell 2013) referring to its rather precarious form of national unity characterised by profound regional differences with uneven economic development, its being the birthplace of fascism, the centrality of the Catholic Church and the general precarity of the legitimacy of the modern nation state. Political power being fragmented at the regional and local levels, Italy is a relatively weaker State than France.

4.2.2 Comparing the party system reshuffling: the rise of challengers

Opportunities change overtime, and party alignments, government configurations, that is, what happens at the level *politics*, is a core aspect of the POS subject to change. To this respect, the two countries present very similar settings, both traditionally bipolar systems of governments characterised by weighty Communist party traditions. Furthermore, both saw the rise and eventual takeover of newcomer parties over recent years (2017 for France and 2018 for Italy), though with an eventual different change in the configuration of party competition and with different post-pandemic (2022) elections results. In what follows, the so-far mentioned trends are detailed per country to set the stage of our national contexts at the outset of the pandemic.

Up to the 2010s, Italy and France witnessed the shift to power of the two mainstream left and right wing parties. Over recent years, both countries experienced an erosion of old party systems most notably signalled by the electoral success of challengers. Beyond the search of the roots of this trend, to which many strands of scholarships have been devoted, notably, Italy and France stand out among European Union countries for having the lowest levels of trust among citizens in elected

[16] An in-depth analysis of political violence in France is out of the scope of this research. For a thorough reconstruction of the use of violence over time, see Sommier et al. (2021).

officials and the overall functioning of democracy, as noted by Rouban[17] (2022). However, there is a notable divergence between the two nations in terms of citizens' trust in their ability to influence their respective countries' political affairs. In France, this level of trust is twice as high as in Italy, with 30% and 13% respectively (ibidem).

The rise of newcomers took two different forms in the countries under consideration. On the one hand, in France, the malaise against established parties translated into 2017's seismic election of Macron's La République En Marche (LREM). 2017 ballots broke the hegemony of the bipolar system (Perrineau, 2017; Brizzi and Lazar, 2018; Rouban, 2018; Dolez et al., 2019), making the second round duel between a centrist and a radical-right candidate (Marine Le Pen's Rassemblement Nationale) an unprecedented configuration in French politics[18] (Durovic 2019). At the outset of the pandemic, hence, France was entering its third year of presidential 'Macronism' with a government led by the centre-right Prime Minister Edouard Philippe (Rouban 2018). The 2022 presidential and legislative elections were in continuation with the 2017 trends. The centrist Macron was reconfirmed as president though he lost its parliamentary majority at the legislative (Knapp 2022). Le Pen's far-right attested as second though with an increase in her second-ballot support as compared to 2017 (41,48% as opposed to 33,90% in 2017) and the eventual right's biggest-ever parliamentary group. Different from Italy, France has a strong institutional left. In 2022, for example, NUPES (Nouvelle Union Populaire ecologique et sociale), the coalition of left, radical left and ecology parties was the second strongest coalition at the legislative elections, with 31,60% as compared to 38,57% gained by Ensemble, the coalition in support of Macron.

The Italian political system is known for being highly polarised and fragmented (Sartori 1982; Cotta and Verzichelli 2008). The country has been characterised by a bipolar political system, with conflict between a centre-right (most notably Berlusconi's Forza Italia) and a centre-left coalition (revolving around the major centre-left party, Democratic Party), which took turns in government for almost 20 years. The long-standing left-right political opposition was progressively replaced by a populist versus anti-populist cleavage. This became evident first at the 2013 political elections, when the Five Star Movement (M5S), which refused to be framed within the left-right spectrum, entered the Parliament. Them, it further solidified in 2018, when the M5S won the elections and formed first 'entirely populist' government (Bressanelli and Natali 2019) with the far-right party League.

[17] According to the 9th Round of European Social Survey, 23% of the French was satisfied with the functioning of democracy in 2018 as compared to 27% of Italians; France and Italy had very similar levels of trust in the national Parliament – 17% and 18% in France and Italy, respectively – and in the elected officials, only 9% in France and 7% in Italy - which made the worst performers at EU level except from Spain that registered the lowest score of 4%.

[18] Until then, indeed, Front's National Far Right had reached the second round only in 2002. The 'republican front', which had hitherto limited the far-right Rassemblement National's access to elective office, crumbled (Knapp 2022). Eventually, In 2017, Le Pen almost doubled her party's second-round score of 17,79 2002, with 33,90% of consensus.

On the eve of the Covid-19 crisis of March 2020, Italy was facing a situation of extreme political weakness and high political conflict. Only seven months earlier, the League leader Matteo Salvini broke the alliance between its party and the Five-Star Movement, leading to the fall of the 'yellow-green' government, in office since June 2018. In order to avoid early elections, the M5S embarked on a second Conte Government thanks to what has been defined the 'unnatural alliance' (Vicentini and Galanti 2021) with centre-left Democratic Party (DP) plus some minor left – Free and Equals - and centrist formations – Renzi's Italia Viva. The political inexperience of the Prime Minister, litigious relations between its component parties and a fragile majority made Conte II government inherently fractious and weak (Giovannini and Mosca 2021). Such a combination was far from ideal for effectively handling a national emergency (Bull 2021). At the same time, the popularity of the far-right opposition parties The League and Brothers of Italy continued to grow in the polls. In February 2021, a government crisis triggered by Matteo Renzi led to Conte's dismissal in favour of a national unity government led by the former President of the European Central Bank, Mario Draghi. All parties represented in Parliament cooperated with the government with the sole exception of Brothers of Italy, which decided to remain in opposition (Russo and Valbruzzi 2022). In 2022, national legislative elections signalled the triumph of the far-right, with the birth of the first far-right government composed by the League, Forza Italia and led by Brothers' of Italy leader, Giorgia Meloni, whose party garnered 26% of the votes.

4.3 Covid-19 preparedness, management and related societal dynamics

4.3.1 The national level: Italy and France

Several structural parameters differentiating countries with regard to their demographic characteristics pertaining both the institutional architecture and the healthcare infrastructure make a straightforward cross-country comparison of Covid-19 impact and management complex. With this caveat in mind, I rely hereafter on three data-driven sources to extract comparative evidence on Italy and France. First, I use the indicators from Ourworldindata[19], which offers the most comprehensive understanding of Covid impact at country, regional and world level. Second, I use Rosental's (2020) ranking of 24 countries worldwide according to their pro-action and reaction to the pandemic, which allows me to gain a deeper understanding beyond the immediate health emergency response into countries' crisis preparedness. Third, I will use the Covid-19 regional safety assessment elaborated by the Deep Knowledge Group for 250 countries on the basis of 500 data sources[20]. Before taking up the analysis, it is necessary to precise that, in this thesis, reference

[19] https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus
[20] For further details, https://www.dkv.global/about-dkg

to ‘pandemic’ and ‘post-pandemic’ periods does not hinge upon neat time boundaries. However, providing specific temporal coordinates can aid in unravelling the intricacies of the its timeline. These markers span from the declaration made by the World Health Organization on March 11th, 2020, officially designating the situation as a pandemic, to the declaration of the conclusion of the health emergency on May 5, 2023.

In general, Italy and France present a shared chronology of Covid-19. After the first cases confirmed in late January, both countries enforced a progressive array of containment measures from February to May 2020 according to the virus spreading rate. These encompassed travel restrictions, the prohibition of large public gatherings, rigorous case isolation, contact tracing efforts, and, in the case of Italy, the establishment of localised lockdown protocols for the first 'red zones', i.e. areas where the risk of infection was higher. Eventually, both countries resorted to the implementation of nationwide lockdowns in March 2020, with the primary objective of mitigating the pressure on their healthcare systems. This period was followed by a slowdown in the rate of infections and the easing of the lockdown from June to September. France lifted the ‘State of health Emergency’, leaving in place only rules on physical distancing, while Italy renovated it every six months until April 2022. However, from August to November 2020, with the restarting of all working activities and the reopening of schools, both countries experienced a relentless rise in the number of new cases testing positive for Covid-19. To confront the beginning of a second wave, Italy and France embraced different strategies. Wanting to avoid a blanket lockdown (Bull 2021), Italian government established a national curfew at 10 pm and adopted a regional approach, dividing the country into three levels of restrictions (the so-called yellow, orange and red zones) according to the rate of infection alongside several other factors – including the number of intensive care unit beds and how close each was to capacity. France, on the other hand, after the appointment of some ‘Enhanced alert zones’ and ‘Maximum alert zones’, implemented a second national lockdown between November and December 2020, lighter than the one experienced in March insofar as schools remained open and people could commute for professional reasons (Warren et al. 2021). In April 2021, the pandemic scenario worsened in both countries due to the spread of Covid-19 variants. France declared a third national lockdown for one month, while Italy continued its containment strategy based on the regional epidemiological context. As vaccination rates advanced, at the end of April 2021, the epidemiological situation began slowly improving and progressive reopening was implemented in both national contexts. Between July and August 2021, Italy and France made mandatory the vaccine for health workers. They also similarly decided to require the Green Pass and, in January and February 2022, respectively, the Super Green pass or the Pass *Vaccinale* – granted only to individuals who were vaccinated against Covid-19 or had recovered

from the infection – to access several activities, places and services. Italy declared the end of the State of Health Emergency on March 31, 2023, while France ended their State of Health Emergency on August 1, 2022[21].

In terms of death rate controlled – i.e., the death rate controlled for the demographic variables that likely exert an influence on the virus' lethality - France belongs to the group of countries with an intermediate level of mortality, while Italy to the group at high mortality - as of Spring 2020 (ibidem). This trend is confirmed also by looking at the excess mortality rate – considered as a more comprehensive measure of the total impact of the pandemic on deaths (Ourworldindata, 2023). Records from ISTAT, the Italian National Institute for Statistics, and the Istituto Superiore di Sanità (the Italian National Institute of Health) show that, on a national scale, in the period between the first discovered case of Covid-19 (20 February) and the end of March, deaths from all causes rose from an average of 65,592 for 2015–19 to 90,946 in 2020, a 38% rise (the month of March alone witnessing a 49.4% rise). During the peaks of the first and the second wave of pandemic, roughly corresponding to early April and to the first half of November 2020, the rate was higher in Italy than in France. However, the starkest differences were registered at the beginning of each wave while over time they tended to converge. For example, the excess mortality rate was 86% in Italy as compared to 36% in France on 29th March 2020 while just few days after, on the 12th April, the two levels were practically identical (56% in Italy and 53% in France). Overall, at 3,4% Italy experienced one of the highest mortality rates in Europe and in the world[22] (Bull 2021).

As of 28th June 2023, the total number of deaths from Covid-19 was 190782 in Italy as compared to 167923 in France (WHO Covid dashboard) against a total number of Covid-19 cases of 38.99 million and 25.89 million in the two countries, respectively. In terms of the healthcare readiness, on which the pro-action status of countries is assessed, Italy was comparatively less prepared to face Covid-19 than France. The country, affected by serious cuts to the public health system dating back to the post-2008 austerity policies (Ricci et al. 2020) ranks 13th and 14th out of a total of 24 countries in terms of public health investments and hospital beds per 1000 inhabitants, respectively. Furthermore, Italy's pandemic plan had not been properly since 2006 , which weakened the medical and operational readiness of the country to handle events of such scale (Novelli 2021). On the other hand, France exhibited a higher degree of healthcare robustness, securing the 9th and 7th positions in the rankings, respectively. Notwithstanding this, literature emphasized the unpreparedness of the French State to Covid-19 (Or et al. 2021). Indeed, over the past decade, the country experienced a

[21] For further details on the measures adopted, see: Or et al. (2021) for France and (Berardi et al. 2020) for Italy; (Pianta, Lucchese, and Nascia 2021) for an in-depth investigation of the Italian government's economic-policy response.

[22] This must be understood in the framework of the socio-demographic profile of Italy, which has one of the oldest population in the world.

decline in the priority given to pandemic prevention, leading to subsequent reductions in investments in protective equipment. As a consequence, there was a severe scarcity of masks, hydro-alcoholic gels and tests when the pandemic broke out.

In terms of contextual conditions, Italy and France present universal healthcare systems; however, their governance structures exhibit significant differences, reflecting the regional and centralized institutional features of the respective countries. In Italy, the healthcare system is highly decentralized, and, though the national level plays a funding, coordinating and monitoring role, regions are autonomous in managing and organizing their healthcare systems. Historically, this has resulted in different levels of cross-regional performance and healthcare models with an ensuing different capacity to contain the spread of the contagion (Mapelli 2012). On the contrary, France has a state-led centralized system governance of the public health arena, with only limited delegation to the regions (Antonini et al. 2022). This yielded significant between-countries differences in crisis management. In France, the top-down health governance ignored significant variations between regions in terms of local epidemiological situations, clusters and health care needs, leading to a centralised management of local affairs (Or et al. 2021). Furthermore, France reverted to its traditional 'Napoleonic-centralist top-down governance mode' in times of crisis (Kuhlmann et al. 2021). Crisis management was indeed concentrated in the hands of the executive branch in a dynamic of hyper-presidentialisation (Brunet 2022), without any significant engagement of locally elected representatives. This is consistent with French conception of public health as an essential function of government, which has the legal responsibility to protect its population's health (Rozenblum 2021). In this sense, health security against Covid-19 was framed as a mission that should be imposed from above by an executive that highly centralized the governance of the health crisis (Bergeron et al. 2020; Bergeron and Borraz 2020). The centralised nature of the French decision-making has allowed for a rapid policy rollout nationwide as well as an effective data collection and sharing on Covid-19 (Desson et al. 2020). On the contrary, in Italy, the regional state structure combined with the heterogeneous epidemiological incidence at regional level created the need for tailoring specific set of policies to emerging local patterns, rather than a one-size fits all approach[23] (Berardi et al. 2020). Despite scholars observing that COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the movement to presidentialization of power (Rullo 2021), the concurrent jurisdiction over health between the state and the regions made the national government's decision-making response dilatory and uncertain, leading to frequent State-region disputes, confusion in the

[23] For example, at an early stage, the major government interventions targeted the most affected regions, with a system of coloured zones according to the level of risk. On 9th March 2020, therefore, the government simply extended the lockdown and social distancing interventions homogeneously throughout the country for then passing back the responsibility to individual regions - under the overall supervision of the Ministry of Health - during the exit strategy in May 2020.

command hierarchies and the proliferation of – sometimes contradictory – measures across decision making levels (Baldi and Profeti 2020; Toth 2021; Vicentini and Galanti 2021)[24].

Against this backdrop, France and Italy implemented comparable responses to the fast-moving crisis, grappling with the delicate balance between controlling the spread of the pandemic while guaranteeing the overall health, social and economic wellbeing of the population. At the beginning, both of them normalised the risk of the virus (Capano 2020) and treated it as a Chinese problem by undertaking a strategy focused on preventing the virus to spread on the national territory. After the detection of the first national cases, on February 21 in Italy and February 24 in France, the countries declared the state of emergency to swiftly impose rules by decree (as January 31 in Italy and March 22 in France). They also commonly appointed ad-hoc task forces and scientific committees composed of experts providing guidance on various policy domains (Galanti and Saracino 2021). While literature agrees on the responses of both countries to the first wave to have been slow, delayed and hesitant (Bull 2021), some differences may be identified. Notably, Italy exhibited proactive measures by declaring a six-month State of Emergency well before confirming infection cases, exemplifying a forward-thinking approach. In contrast, France's decision to adopt the State of Emergency approximately two months after discovering the pandemic's spread in the country indicates a delayed response and a belated heightening of government concerns regarding COVID-19. Covid-19 had indeed been a minimal consideration to French government until mid-March for a combination of factors (Or et al., 2021b; Rozenblum, 2021). Firstly, there was a short supply of essential protective equipment and screening tests during the first wave of the pandemic – hence initial reassuring that the probability of the virus spreading in France was low and that masks were not necessary. Secondly, when the pandemic hit France, the country was in the middle of the longest strikes in French history against the retirement reform initiated by the President, which had been involving French hospitals as well since November 2019. Third, all French political parties were concentrated on preparation for the municipal elections planned for March 15 and 22 2020, the first after the 2017 presidential polls and a crucial electoral deadline for Macron's unpopular government (Guigo 2021)[25]. On the other hand, Italy adopted an incremental policy response to the crisis. Incrementalism was rooted in an initial normalisation of the risk but also in Italy's long-standing low responsiveness capacity. In this sense, the pandemic, engulfing the Italian government in inefficient negotiation dynamics between different territorial levels, only shed further light on pre-

[24] Frictions between the central government and the regions on the responsibility for decisions that may have affected the spread of the contagion emerged several times. A paradigmatic case was the failed establishment, at the beginning of March 2020, of red zone status in one of the most affected areas in the country, namely the cities of Alzano e Nembro in the province of Bergamo, Lombardy.

[25] The resignation of Health Minister Agnès Buzyn to become candidate for mayor of Paris is particularly insightful of the low attention paid by political elites to the impending crisis.

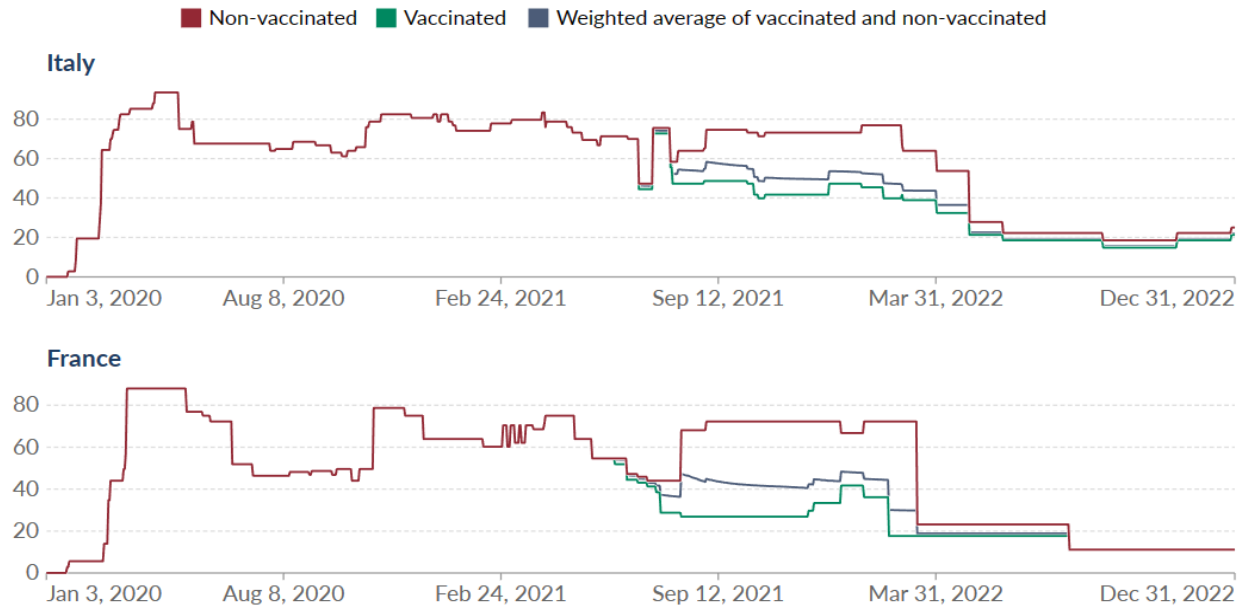
existing weaknesses affecting the Italian institutional system (Baldi and Profeti 2020; Casula and Pazos-Vidal 2021).

Overall, both countries implemented lockdown measures while police controls and sanctions to prevent people from leaving their homes for unnecessary reasons were intensified. The severity of the lockdown changed over time according to the evolution of the health situation. The figure below (Figure 1) reports the Oxford Stringency Index, elaborated by the Coronavirus Government Response Tracker of the University of Oxford to monitor the intensity of the measures adopted at national level by combining nine different metrics[26]. Italy indeed imposed the most stringent restrictions in Europe between 31 January and 4 May. It was, in the two months between 10 March and 9 May, even more stringent than China, and, on 12 April, reached a 'stringency index' figure of 93.52 (one of the highest across the world) and remained at that level until 3 May. Overall, in Italy the index was never below 60 since the start of the pandemic until July 2021. By contrast, in France the stringency was more fluctuating, following the waves of contagion, with a more relaxed summer in 2020 relative to Italy before a further tightening during the second wave in autumn 2020. In both countries, however, the stringency remained high for the non-vaccinated throughout winter 2021-2022 with a progressive de-escalation of the measures starting earlier in France than in Italy. Zooming in into an aspect of restrictions, the halt to public gatherings, of particular interest for our focus on social movements, data show that France held restrictions much longer than Italy. The Hexagon indeed implemented a ban on large public meetings, imposing a strict limit of 10 individuals. Notably, this limit remained steadfast and unaltered until July 2021, indicating a sustained and unwavering approach. In contrast, Italy demonstrated a relatively more flexible stance, with a similar measure enforced only from March to May 2020. Subsequently, during the second wave, restrictions on public gatherings were reinstated in Italy from November 2020 to July 2021. Furthermore, both governments took action to protect work and income continuity. The measures to this aim consisted of economic bonuses, reduction or suspension of taxes, credit instruments, and guarantees for businesses and support for family life. Italy introduced a ban on dismissing employees which stood out as a unique measure in Europe – though expired in July 2021 for big companies and in October for small and medium-sized enterprises . In March 2020, Macron declared that he would have done "whatever it takes" to compensate workers and enterprises. This translated in a public intervention of such magnitude that scholars talked about the purported resurgence of the State in its role as a Keynesian social regulator (Rouban 2022). However, these stimuli only mitigated the inescapable economic consequences of the pandemic. In

[26] For further details see: https://ourworldindata.org/covid-stringency-index

September 2020, 305,600 Covid-19 related job losses were estimated since the beginning of the year in France, with low-wage earners and young people being the most hardly hit

Figure 1. Stringency Index in France and Italy between January 2020 and December 2022[27]



Source: Hale, T., Angrist, N., Goldszmidt, R. et al. A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government ResponseTracker). Nat Hum Behav 5, 529–538 (2021).

(Bounie et al 2020). Italy experienced a 8,9% reduction in GDP (Orlando and Rodano 2022) and the loss of around 724,000 jobs in 2020 - the vast majority among temporary workers (mostly women and young people) and the self-employed, with just 90,000 being shed among people with permanent contracts (equal to 12,3% of the overall drop) (Saraceno 2021). This led to an employment contraction by approximately 3%, making it one of the most significant declines across European countries . In contrast, France experienced a comparatively lower reduction in employment, not exceeding 0.5% during the same period (ISTAT 2022). When EU economies rebounded in 2021, employment in Italy grew just by 0,6% while France registered an increase of 1,6% (ibidem). These dynamics aggravated Italian distance to the EU average with respect to all the job market indicators. As a case in point, at the end of 2021 Italy had an employment rate of 58,2%, 10,2 points below the EU average, with the gap widening from 9,1 points in 2019. Finally, both countries relied on similar vaccination strategies to curb the expansion of the virus (Antonini et al.

[27] The stringency of the measures is reported as differentiated according to three categories of individuals: those who are vaccinated; those who are non-vaccinated; and a national average which is weighted based on the share of people that are vaccinated.

2022). Today, around 81% of the population is fully[28] vaccinated in Italy, against 78% in France (Mathieu et al. 2020; Ward et al. 2022). In both countries, the question of Covid-19 vaccination obligation for healthcare workers and the introduction of the vaccination certificate were politicized at national level and stoked anti-vaccine sentiments and vaccine hesitancy. In France, the issue acquired even more political salience in light of the forthcoming 2022 legislative and presidential elections, with parties both on the left and on the right denouncing the authoritarian drift and the potential limitations on individual liberties of such a regulation. Furthermore, the health pass policy elicited protests across France starting in early August 2021 and, despite the attendance has waned markedly ever since, protests were still supported by around 30% of the population as of September 2021 (Ward et al. 2022). A number of protest took place in Italy as well since the beginning of the pandemic, initially targeting the policies taken to reduce contagion and subsequently focusing on the vaccine and vaccination (della Porta and Lavizzari 2022).

According to the Covid-19's safety report (Deep Knowledge Group 2020), despite its greater health care robustness, France performed worst in terms of regional safety assessment, ranking 60th on 200 countries, seven positions after Italy. The country scored better than Italy on 2 out of the six parameters used to calculate the overall safety score, one of which pertaining to Covid-19 emergency preparedness, while the other one being the quarantine efficiency. This suggests that one of the most critical factors impacting regional safety and stability was not the general level of healthcare sophistication in non-pandemic times – on which France did comparatively better – but the specific governmental crisis management strategies and policies used to combat pandemics. It is remarkable that the starkest differences between the two countries were registered at the level of monitoring and detection – which include the testing efficiency, the reliability and transparency of data and governments' tracking capacity of infection rates and compliance with social distancing measures – and government efficiency of risk management.

A last aspect worth considering regards the societal dynamics surrounding the emergency management. The transition from risk normalization to incrementalism, conflicting messages regarding the severity of the new virus and the significance of masks (notably in France) (Ruiu 2020; Or et al. 2021), coupled with a chaotic and overabundant use of scientific experts, especially in Italy, affected the efficiency and speed of the reaction to the pandemic. However, the societal effects of crisis management have been diverging in the two countries. As far as Italy is concerned, the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a generalised acceptance of anti-Covid measures in a 'rally around

[28] Full vaccination refers to the share of people having completed the initial 2 doses protocol. Source: https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations accessed July 2023

the flag' dynamic (Segatti 2020). This translated into a patriotic and community reaction to the emergency. The images of people singing from their balconies, waving Italian flags and clapping their hands for the 'heroes' working in hospitals went viral while the motto "everything will be fine" was obsessively repeated on the media. This paved the way for the worldwide portray of the "Italian model" of reaction to Covid-19 as an example to be followed. In such a situation, the government not only survived but consolidated its erstwhile fragile position. Despite a turbulent and difficult first wave, in which it struggled to contain the health crisis before gradually establishing control over it, Conte II government underwent an increase in popularity with Prime Minister's exercise of a strong leadership leading to the soaring of his personal ratings - at least in the first year of the pandemic (Mancosu, Vassallo, and Vegetti 2020; Bull 2021; Giovannini and Mosca 2021; Novelli 2021). Rather than mirroring an increased affiliation for a specific party or coalition, the growth in consensus had to do more with personalisation dynamics (Rullo 2021). The same leap in polls, indeed, was experienced also by those regional presidents deemed as having reacted effectively to the first phase of emergency – most notably Luca Zaia (Veneto, Lega) and Vincenzo De Luca (Campania, centre-left), while the Lega President of the most affected region (Lombardy), Attilio Fontana, experienced a decline of 16 percentage points (Demopolis 2020).

In France, on the contrary, the initial downplay of the danger and the inconsistency of the restriction measures – e.g. schools and public spaces were closed on 12 and 14 March respectively but the municipal elections planned for March 15 were not cancelled – led to the further weakening of an already unpopular government (Guigo 2021). President Macron's television speeches aimed at uniting and reassuring the population but the expected 'rally around the flag effect' in times of crisis (Mueller 1970) resulted to be more challenging to trigger. In fact, despite Macron's attempts to gather the population around the flag, confusion in government positions and contradictory declarations between the President's statements and those of the government itself failed to nurture trust. A recent research on citizens' satisfaction with pandemic management (Rouban 2022) shows a declining popularity of Macron both on the right and on the left, with the exception of his own electorate. However, as Rouban (2022) highlighted, the health crisis in France has been highly politicised and the reactions to crisis management are explained by political more than economists interpretations. People's dissatisfaction does not indeed stem from a negative assessment of pandemic-related public policies or by the relative worsening of their socio-economic position because of the crisis; rather, it is the reflex of a deep and enduring democratic malaise that has characterized Emmanuel Macron's five-year tenure since 2017. As a result, anti-Covid policies were not politicised within a debate between a majority – opposition dynamics but were just another field in which the institutional – populist cleavage manifested itself, with the latter standing for a greater

requests of more direct democracy and an overall distrusts towards the elites (Rouban 2022). In this sense, the pandemic in France only reinvigorated a critique towards representative democracy started few years earlier and eminently epitomized by the claims of the Yellow Vests movement.

4.3.2 The local level: Milan and Paris

Milan and Paris are two large and rich metropolitan cities with several similarities and differences. Milan has a larger surface area but it has half of inhabitants (around 1 million and two millions, respectively) and it is less densely populated than Paris.

Milan is the regional capital of Lombardy, the productive heart of Italy, a region historically governed by right and radical right parties and run since 2018 by the Attilio Fontana, a member of the League. Notably, the February 2023 regional polls secured Fontana a second term. His re-election has been met with surprise given the harsh critiques against the region pandemic handling and different scandals hitting the council itself (Bull 2021). Yet, regional majorities do not go hand in hand with city-level political equilibria. Since 2011, indeed, the city of Milan has been ruled by a left-wing coalition, driven first by the mayor Giuliano Pisapia (2011-2016) and then by Giuseppe Sala, who was re-elected in 2021. Over the last thirty years, Milan has been at the centre of globalisation and financialization processes, which have and are transforming its urban outlook. The metamorphosis of its physical appearance has been only the surface of a more profound transformation that has invested the social, economic and employment structure of the city (Ranci et al. 2008). Historically the industrial heart of the country, Milan has progressively shifted to a service sector-led productive structure. However, the glow of the 'global' city has come with the contradictions of an uneven distribution of the urban growth's related benefits. This is the case of gentrification of many areas and the progressive expulsion of disadvantaged classes - especially the impoverished middle class – from urban areas subject to strong real estate revaluation - and hence skyrocketing prices (Foot 2015). While it has the highest average income in Italy, Milan is also the city where the gap in income distribution between the richer and poorer percentiles are the starkest in Italy (Monni, Lelo, and Tomassi 2018). Strong social inequalities are spatially concentrated in the city, in a dichotomous relation between a central and the suburban neighbourhoods of the city, which have their contextual realities and identities. The social and economic transformations that have transformed Milan into the main industrial, commercial and financial centre of Italy and their controversial effects have been at the core of the claims of the city's progressive social movement organisations, a dynamic most notably epitomized by the mobilisations against the organisation of the World Expo in Milan in 2015 (Bertuzzi 2017).

In terms of progressive social movement milieu, Milan has rich and variegated network of organisations, comprising both local groups affiliated to the main national and transnational progressive mobilisations within specific cycles of contention – as we will see by the exploration of the diverse case studies selected as representative of the urban social movement milieu, in the next chapter. Furthermore, Milan has been at the forefront of a peculiarly Italian socio-political phenomenon, that of the *Centri Sociali Autogestiti* (Self-managed social centres, hereafter also CSA). Originated by collectives from the radical left, autonomous or anarchist, *Centri Sociali* are spatialized actors strongly rooted in specific urban neighbourhoods – though not necessarily with locally focused claims – claiming for the de-commodification of the urban space and social relations in an on overall anticapitalist framework (Montagna 2007). Their strong territorial rooting and the ability to forge both local and extra-local networks of movement relationships make them central actors in the local contentious politics arena.

As far as the pandemic is concerned, the city of Milan has been at the centre of the Covid-19 tale in Italy. Northern Italy has indeed been the epicentre of the pandemic in Italy and the area where the world's highest death toll was reached between February and April 2020. Within it, Lombardy recorded the highest number of cases, 4167924 - followed by Veneto, with 2731517 cases (Worldometer, 2023) – to the point that Vicentini and Galanti (2021) referred to the region as 'the sick man of Italy'. Milan province has been the most affected one followed by Brescia, Bergamo and Monza. It should be noted that while per absolute numbers the municipality of Milan emerges as the worst performer as total number of cases, the Covid case rate on the population stands at 39%, a figure lower than that registered by other municipalities of the Milan province, where rate touches 50%. As a matter of fact, the first non-imported Covid-case, the so-called *paziente zero*, was identified in Codogno, Lombardy. The first restrictions were issues in a cluster of eleven municipalities affected, 10 of which in Lombardy. These 10 municipalities became eventually the first 'red zones' on 23rd February, with a government decree of full lockdown. The following days, when it became clear that the virus had already escaped the red zones and was spreading rapidly cross-regionally, the government created a new 'yellow zone' comprising the entire region of Lombardy. On 8th March, Lombardy was escalated to a 'red zone'. The image of military vehicles lining up in Lombardy in March 2020 while they were taking away hundreds of corpses because the mortuaries could no longer deal with them, flashed around the world[29]. Lombardy was at the forefront of pandemic chronicle also for the failures to properly protect the elderly and the

[29] ISTAT compared the deaths at municipal level (6,866 communes, representing 87% of the total number) for the first three months of 2020. Deaths in the 36 northern provinces in Italy doubled, with some enormous rises in some of them: Bergamo (568%), Cremona (391%), Lodi (370%), Brescia (290%), Piacenza (264%) and Parma (208%).

vulnerable in care homes. Confronted with a chronic shortage of hospital beds, effect of a long-run reliance on private providers to deliver health services (Buzelli and Boyce 2021), regional government decided to allow the transfer of the least critical patients – irrespective of whether they had tested positive for Covid-19 – from hospitals to care homes (Bull 2021). Yet, in lack of specialized structures, equipment and procedures, the virus penetrated retirement homes with devastating consequences[30]. When the first clusters were discovered, the municipality of Milan initially opposed the image of Lombardy as an infected region and mayor Sala promoted the campaign "Milano non si ferma" ('Milan doesn't stop') which invited the city's inhabitants not to be afraid of the virus. After the skyrocketing growth in cases, and with the mayor openly admitting his mistake in underestimating the risk of virus, the municipality launched the project "Milano aiuta" ('Milan helps') to provide support to those facing economic, social or health difficulties due to the pandemic. The project involved various proximity initiatives, including the distribution of food packages and assistance to elderly and it relied on the creation of Voluntary Emergency Brigades (BVE) at neighbourhood level to achieve capillarity throughout the territory[31].

Since 2014, the city of Paris has been administered by the Socialist Party with mayor Anne Hidalgo, while the regional council of Ile-de-France has been ruled since 2015 by centre right, with president Valérie Pécresse, supported by the Republicans. With a GDP of 764.8 billion euros, Paris stands as the wealthiest metropolitan area in Europe, outshining other prominent cities such as Madrid, Berlin, and Milan. Notably, the economic might of Paris surpasses Milan's GDP by more than double, making it a dominant economic force on the continent. As Milan, Paris stands out as a winner of globalisation and financialisation processes and it is political, economic and cultural centre of France. The Parisian social and administrative context is strongly by 20 neighbourhoods (*arrondissements*), each one with its own history, social peculiarities and hence identity. The arrondissements organize the political and cultural life of the city and the presence of rich and lively social movement milieus is strongly dependent on the arrondissements' origins and traditions of militancy. With regard to the pandemic, Paris and surrounding areas were the epicentres of the virus diffusion in France. As of August 2020, the region Ile de France had more than 250 hospitalizations per 100.000 inhabitants, the highest record in France, reached only by the region Grand-Est (Desson et al. 2020). Overall, the region registered a total number of infections at 7053338 (Santè publique France).

[30] The major scandal invested Lombardy's main care home, the Pio Albergo Trivulzio in Milan and it resulted in legal prosecutions (Maggioni 2020).

[31] Further details on the project and on the Brigades are provided in the next chapter where case studies, among which the BVE, are presented.

4.4 Key trends about Italian and French social movement landscapes

Given the focus of this work for social movements' change, it is necessary to outline the main features of the Italian and French movement landscapes. This section takes up this aim by comparatively addressing two dimensions of analysis: the interaction between progressive movements and the political system (sub-Section 4.4.1) and a depiction of the social movement actors on the progressive side via a reconstruction of the main cycles of contention in both countries (4.4.2).

4.4.1 Progressive movements-party relationship

Notwithstanding a structurally unfavourable polity, France has an exceptionally vital social movement sector and a long-run tradition of contentious mobilisations (Hewelett 1998; Hoffman 1974; Mayer 2013). Histories of revolutions (1789, 1830, 1848, the Parisian Commune of 1871), barricades and episodes of social unrest have been preserved and kept alive in the collective memory (Shorter and Tilly 1974; Tilly 1986). Indeed, if the routinization and growing legitimacy of protest actions long deemed unconventional is a trend common to most Western democracies (Inglehart 1977), France stands out for a strong support for social movements, an above-average propensity to protest and for a greater resort to acts of protest actions, especially the most challenging ones (Mayer 2013). Street demonstrations in France have become so much a normal way to express claims to the government between two elections that they are commonly referred to as the "third round of elections", that is, the "social" round. Interestingly enough, these trends take place in a country marked by structurally weak mass organisations. Party and trade union membership have been declining since the 1980s and trade unions register one of the lowest rate of unionized employees in Western Europe (Groux and Perno 2008; Sommier 2012). The prospects for mobilization have alternated according to the fortunes of an historically strong institutional French left.

In particular, the rise to power of the socialist left in the '80s corresponded to a period of relative stability and calm as for dissent expression. However, the disappointment with the socialists' turn to the right during Mitterrand's government and the decline of the Communist Party opened a political space to "the left of the left" bringing together groups that traditionally opposed one another such as the Marxists, communists and Trotskyists disillusioned by the socialist experiment (Waters 2003). Welded together in an heterogeneous coalition comprising the organizations defending the 'have-not's, coordinators and dissident unions, antiglobalization network like Attac, over the last twenty

years France has witnessed the coming up of a composite progressive front opposing neoliberal politics, erupting in public explosion of dissent during the multiple occasions this policy direction manifested itself, irrespective of the government in power. The vivacity of the movement scene contrasted with the immobility of the Socialist Party with regard to prospects of progressive change. Literature in this regard points to an ever increasing distance between grassroots and institutional left (Sommier 2012). Opened in the '80s, this divorce consolidated overtime driven by the social democratic turn of the Socialist Party (Sommier 2012). Among the most prominent episodes, the campaign for the "No" during the referendum on the European Union draft constitution (on May 9, 2005, 55% voted no), sustained by a composite alter-global coalition, made public the grassroots left fracture with the elite system[32]. Reinvigorated by the victory at the referendum, activists claimed for a political opening to social struggles. This led to the proposition of a shared name representing the united left at the 2007 presidential elections. However, the electoral debacle and the eventual victory of Sarkozy marked both a restructuring of the "left of the left"[33] of the party spectrum and a reinforcement of the movement. The convergence of the Global Recession, which coincided with Sarkozy's ascent to the Elysée Palace, and the subsequent implementation of austerity measures, greatly eroded the Republican President's popularity and ignited widespread protests – as detailed in the previous paragraph. Over recent years, along with the persistence of the social question, opposition to President Macron and to his policies became a further platform of struggle convergence for the progressive front, most eminently epitomized by the 2023 protest against his plan of pension reform. Control and repression, whose most glaring case of exercise has been towards the Yellow Vests (Trouillard 2022), has become the hallmark of government-movement relationship (Sommier et al. 2021). La France Insoumise had attempted to align with the Yellow Vests' anti-austerity and social justice stance, yet without being effectively incorporating the movement's demands within their policy agendas due to its decentralized and leaderless nature.

In Italy, the progressive front has historically found its institutional referent in the Italian Communist Party. The unilateral support for the Party started to falter in the 1970s, when the Party changed strategy towards an 'historical compromise' with the Socialists and the Christian Democratic, along with turning to a repressive attitude towards workers and movements with the consequence of the latter's further alienation (Bianchi and Caminiti 1997). In the '90s and early

[32] The vote was not directed against the European Union so much as it was against the neoliberal and undemocratic character of the text the "Europe of big business". Among the signatory of the petition for the "no" the French Communist Party (PCF) and the Revolutionary Communist League (LRC).

[33] LRC transformed into the New anticapitalist Party (NPA) while former Revolutionary Communist League militants found The United left. Jean Luc Melenchon exited from the PS and created the Left Party (Parti de gauche), allied with the French Communist Party in the "Left front" .

2000s, the bipolar alternation between right wingers and leftists governments ensured the presence of a composite left front, from more moderate to more radical left. However, at the 2008 national elections, the radical left had remained out of the Parliament for the first time since the post-war. The ensuing Democratic Party and the unfavourable political opportunities deriving from its neoliberal-leaning positions were at the base of the Italian anti-austerity cycle's failure in obtaining substantial political outcomes – compared to similar dynamics in other Southern European countries (Andretta 2019).

4.4.2 Social movement actors on the progressive front: an historical account between old and new social movements

The main characteristics of French dynamics of contention and mobilization capacity (Giugni and Grasso 2019) can be traced following some of its key cycles of contention. The relative pacification of the class cleavage following the period of economic prosperity in the post-war decades led, after May '68, to the spring-up of new social movements mobilising on post-materialist issues (Inglehart 1977) – ecological movement, feminism, pacifism, homosexual movement, mobilisations in support of the Third World and of human rights (Sommier and Crettiez 2002). However, this did not coincide with the disappearance of the relevance of material issues. Sommier and Crettiez (2012) emphasize that the end of economic prosperity at the end of the '70s brought back to the fore the social question due to rising unemployment, housing crisis, and overall precarization. However, times were still not ripe for discontent to explode. The '80s were indeed a period of reflux and dormancy in social movement activism – partly explained by the victory of the socialist left (Mayer 2013) – while the crisis of traditional political participation was in the Hexagon more profound than elsewhere (Sommier 2012). In opposition to the '80s *doxa* regarding the alleged end of the social conflict, social movement sectors have thrived since the 1990s (Mathieu 2011). It was at that time, indeed, that the precarization of a growing part of the population led to the convergence of heterogeneous struggles within the left-libertarian family around the issue of the "*sans*", that is, the 'without ones': those without shelter, without papers, without jobs or, more generally, without rights. The irruption into the public scene of the 'excluded' (Sommier 1993) signalled a shift from a vertical conflict between the bottom and the top of the society to an horizontal one between insiders and outsiders. The category of outsiders acted as a common collective identity for all those in precarious social and economic conditions. Differing for their individual grievances and stakes, they all reclaimed their shared position of socio-political marginalization. The movement of "those

without", and the emergence of a plethora of associations[34] giving voice to this poorly-resourced vast set of population, made the *social question* the core of the '90s renaissance of social conflict[35] (Aguiton and Bensaid 1997; Fillieule 1997; Sommier and Fillieule 2013). In particular, 1995 marked a pivotal date in the history of contemporary protest politics in France. France was indeed invested by a *social storm* in autumn of that year leading scholars to refer to it as the largest social mobilisation after the effervesce of May 1968 and its aftermath (Mathieu 2010; Trat 1996). A series of protests and strikes were organised against the neoliberal reform plans – most notably the Plan to reform Social Security - promoted by the right-wing presidency of Chirac and of its Prime Minister Juppé (Trat 1996). Autumn 1995 cycle of contention holds a deep-seated significance that goes beyond its immediate context alone and can be viewed as paradigmatic of French tradition of mobilization - the movement self-portrayed itself as *the* Social Movement (Beroud, Mouriaux, and Vakaloulis 1998). The country is indeed marked by a vibrant though amorphous social movement landscape, characterised by a mosaic of multifaceted mobilized groups originally developed apart from each other on different issues. Traditionally fragmented between old and new social movements, these disparate groups converge temporarily on larger social movements, in a process of hybridization of militant cultures around centre-of-gravity-battles. In this sense, in 1995, various collective actors and groups including student organizations, workers, and advocates for women's rights converged in opposition to the erosion of social rights resulting from the shift to towards neoliberalism in the realm of social policy.

At least other three aspects make the 1990s worth to look at to understand French activism landscape. First, new actors emerged in the social movement sector, bringing together materialist and post materialist claims[36] . Second, the '90s protests for the defence of the French social model were considered ones of the episodes laying the foundation of the French anti-globalization movement. The presence of a pre-existing field of varied social movement organisations, already mobilized against domestic neoliberal policies, hence against themes resonant with the antiglobalization frame, made France – along with Italy - one of the pioneers of the Global Justice Movement (GJM) in Europe[37] (Agrikolianksy 2005; Agrikolianksy and Sommier 2005; Sommier 2007). The alter globalization front in France was really a 'movements of movements', that is a

[34] For a list of the associations mobilising the "those without", see Sommier and Crettiez 2002.

[35] Among the most notable mobilisations, it is worth mentioning the mobilisations in support of undocumented migrants (*les sans papiers*) in 1996-1997 and the mobilisations for the denunciation of unemployment and job insecurity (*mouvement des chomeurs*) in winter 1997-1998.

[36] New forms of radical unionism rejecting existing unions and associations (most notable, the "SUD" Solidaires, Unitaires et Democratiques); myriad networks focused on social justice issues such as AC! (Acting against Unemployment), Droits Devant!! (Rights First) and DAL (The Right to Housing); global justice protesters led by Attac (Sommier and Crettiez 2002).

[37] The first World Social Forum in Porto Alegre was a joint initiative of Brazil and France; moreover, the second European social forum was held in Paris in 2003, after the first one in Florence the previous year.

galaxy of both ad-hoc organisations created for the specific cause of the globalisation and pre-existing movement families, most notable the radical left[38], the movement of "those without", trade unions, the ecology movement, the human rights movement and the sphere of organisations in support to the humanitarian-development cause (Sommier 1993). The third and possibly most notable remark has to do with the persistent relevance of the social issue. As shown in various forms by the mobilizations that have followed since the turn of the millennium, the '*question sociale'* resurfaced multiple times as a convergence issue of disparate groups commonly resisting "the questioning of a model of society whose public services and social protection represent since the Liberation the fundamental building blocks" (Mathieu 2011, p. 19). In 2005-2006, with the spread of collective protest actions by the unemployed and the precariously employed, most notably signalled by the creation of new collectives of precarious workers[39] outside traditional trade union channels (Lahusen 2013); in 2010, with the movement against the pension reform; in 2016, with the Nuit Debout movement (Felicetti and Della Porta 2019), the French anti-austerity movement or "movement of the crisis" (Della Porta and Mattoni, 2014), triggered by the suddenly imposed grievance of the Jobs Act - *Loi Travail*- aimed at deregulating the labour market; in 2018, with the Yellow Vest social movement; in 2019, with a new mobilisations against the Pension reform, put on hold because of the spread Covid-19 and resumed in 2023, when the reform was eventually approved via the controversial procedure of the 49.3[40]. This is not the space to go further into the above mentioned mobilisations. Their occurrence and the list style with which I presented them was intentionally aimed at showing the '90s enduring legacy with respect to both the centrality of social issue, and the patterned nature within the left-libertarian family of occasionally creating alliances to thwart unwanted change. Furthermore, it attests to the effervesce of French social movement milieu that has been unstoppably visible (Melucci 1989) since 2016, first with the Nuit Debout protests and then with the Yellow Vest movements. In this climate of social unrest, the pandemic hit France during the cycle of contention against Macron's plan of pension reform. The public health system itself had been affected by months-long protests and strikes by hospital personnel demanding more resources when the first cases started appearing in the country of the Enlightenment (Or et al., 2021).

[38] With "radical left", I refer to the "left of the left, "a nebula of radical groups at the, with different ideological positions – radicals, anarchists, , autonomists – sharing an anti-authoritarian stance towards the State although without a common organizational structure.

[39] The Stop Precariousness Network, Precarious Generation, the Precarious and Associates of Paris or the Coordination of Intermittent and Precarious Workers of Île-de-France (CIP-IDF) are among the most significant examples.

[40] The article 49.3 of the French Constitution allows the government to force passage of a law without a vote, unless the parliament passes a motion of no confidence.

Italy has a history of very rich and vibrant progressive social movement milieu. Again, revising the main cycles of contention is a good exercise to understand the socio-political cultures of much of the leftist movement organisations, also those rooted at local level – as in the case of this thesis - are imbued with.

The Italian left-libertarian family has been historically related to the strength of the Italian left, which included the largest communist party in the West, bulk of the partisan resistance against fascism, and some of the most active social movements, rooted in the working class and the peasantry. The practices and theoretical elaborations of the this movement area originate from the legacy of the mobilisations of the 1960s and 1970s. At that time, Italy experienced a period of unparalleled struggle kicked off by the student movements of 1967-1968 and by a highly conflictual "Hot Autumn" in the Northern factories from 1969-1970 (Balestrini and Moroni 1997; Osterwell 2013). The 'great wave' lasted over a decade, reaching its high point in the "Movement of 1977" (Bologna 1980). The critique of capitalism and of traditional instruments of representation that the '60s and the '70s were generative of – although to a various degrees, according to the theoretical traditions of specific groups and projects – had an enduring influence on the horizon and work of the variegated Italian left – ranging from social centres, *Rifondazione Comunista*, and groups belonging to the autonomist tradition. The birth of *operaismo* itself, part of a rich tradition of what it is alternatively referred to as critical or autonomist Marxism, is a culture-specific product of the people and the experiences of the broader left in Italy. The cycle of movements of 1968-1979 and their theoretical legacies reached through to the Global Justice Movement, which, in Italy, was a distinctive place-based phenomenon, at the same time grown out of past social movements and consistently part of a *global* movement. Italians were third in number of attendees of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre and the first to hold a Social Forum in Europe, in Florence in 2002. Moreover, the 2001 anti-G8 protests in Genoa were the largest mobilizations in the anti-globalization movement, ultimately come to be considered a significant turning point within the Italian leftist movement arena itself, partly due to the astonishing turnout but also because of the violence used by the police (Reiter and Della Porta 2006). At the turn of the millennium, the GJM ignited in Italy, after Genoa, a period of near constant mobilization within the country by a complex of actors on a myriad of issues – the global war, Italian-specific labour and immigration laws, among others – to the point that literature referred to it as the Italy's "movimento dei movimenti" (movement of movements) (Osterwell 2013). As scholars emphasized (ibidem), the place-based specificity of the Italian global justice movement unravelled in its political aims: not only an opposition to neoliberalism but also a critique towards the foundations of liberal representative

democracy and the desire for "another kind of politics", legacy of the 1960s and 1970s Italy's particularly movement history.

This push, in late 2000s, was epitomized by a strong disillusionment with Italian politics and by the opposition to Silvio Berlusconi that in 2008 had obtained the greatest electoral victory of the recent history. Berlusconi government and its public spending cuts were at the centre of the early Italian anti-austerity cycle of contention, paved the way for by the students movement l'*Onda anomala* against the university reform in 2008 (Caruso et al. 2010; Cini 2018), politicized in anti-austerity key by a wide and heterogeneous "anti-berlusconian social front" (Bosi and Zamponi 2019; Zamponi 2013) in 2010-2011 for then breaking apart in fragmented and sector-specific mobilisations since 2011 – including housing right movements (Grazioli 2018; Grazioli and Caciagli 2018; Caciagli 2021), women's rights mobilisations (Chironi 2019) and logistic workers' struggles (Cini and Goldmann 2020; Tassinari et al. 2020; della Porta, Chesta, and Cini 2022; Cini 2023). In this sense, despite austerity having been met with significant opposition in the squares and streets of Italy (Mosca 2013; della Porta 2015; della Porta and Andretta 2013), protests remained scattered, fragmented and incapable of turning the anti-Berlusconian dissent into an united and transversal anti-austerity movement, a situation described as characterised by "protests without movement" (Andretta 2017, 2019). To this regard, it has been pointed out that " although issues linked to the crisis and austerity were present in the Italian movements, they are more characterised by the identity of the actors (e.g. students) and by the type of claim" than by a shared alternative political project (Cardoso et al. 2018).

This example shows a main characteristic of the Italian social movement milieu: activism of various social actors, each significantly conflictual in their own field, but rarely able to exploit moments of convergence in order to build a mass and transversal mobilisation[41]. In absence of a movement capable to bring together dissent against the unpopular austerity policies and to politicise it in a progressive direction, the economic crisis in Italy became a fertile terrain for growing consensus around anti-system - the Five Star movement - and then radical-right forces – at first, in 2018, with the upsurge at the polls of the League and then, in 2022, with the electoral takeover of Brothers of Italy. In a context characterized by the emergence of a political backlash with "Anti-Salvinism" - from Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League - becoming the main frame of the centre left, progressive social movement sectors that mobilised in 2017 and 2018 were described as actively resisting this 'backlash' (Porta et al. 2022). It is interesting to note that, also in this case, there was

[41] The same dynamic had resulted in the dissolution of the precarious workers' movement in mid-2000s, as internal divisions among the actors prevented the formation of a unified and robust precarious front, capable of involving large sectors of the population under a common identity. (Giorgi and Caruso 2015).

not a compact front, but emerging resistance to a right-wing backlash (Meyer et al. 2018) unfolded in different areas by different collective actors mobilising on a wide variety of social justice and democracy claims, including feminist, student, territory/environment, peace, anti-racism and anti-mafia movements. Before the pandemic, in late 2019, the anti-backslash spirit was eminently expressed by the Sardine movement, a grassroots political movement emerged against the assertion of the right-wingers in the regional elections of 2020, originated in Emilia Romagna against the candidate of the League in the regional elections, Lucia Borgonzoni, but then spread interregionally (Caruso and De Blasio 2021; Hamdaoui 2022). The Sardines were appointed as an instance of an anti-populist movement (Caiani and Weisskircher 2022), born – contrary to France - in absence of a progressive electoral alternative and mobilised against Salvini and the League's overall rhetoric and political agenda.

The pandemic therefore caught both France and Italy in the middle of mass mobilisations though around different claims and by different movements. In the case of France, dual-edged criticisms to central government were directed by, on the one hand, a composite progressive front against the perspective of Macron's pension reform, and, on the other, by the Yellow Vest movement. In Italy, a fragmented social movement milieu had taken the streets over last year around the progressive-backlash cleavage, finding in the opposition to Salvini and to its policies a source of convergence.

4.5 Conclusions

The emergence of a movement, as well as its phases of strength and weaknesses, its stages of visibility and latency and strategic shifts are explained by the interplay of external and internal conditions. While the latter are the focus of this thesis, this chapter considered the former, addressing the characteristics of the two national contexts in which movement organizations at the centre of this work are embedded within. These comprised the characteristics of the overall political context, including how these shifted from before to after the pandemic; the pandemic management, with a focus on how above shed-light on characteristics contributed to how the pandemic crisis unravelled differently across the Italian and French set-ups; and the characteristics of the respective social movement fields, including relationship with parties and major actors.

In terms of the overall context, apart the forms of varying government – a semi-presidential republic France and a parliamentary republic, Italy - differences concern the extent of State centralization and attitude toward challengers. On the one hand, France is a strongly centralized state granting little local autonomy and with a repressive strategies towards challengers. This left little in the way

of opportunities for institutional participation and explained the fact that when confrontations broke out - as they did repeatedly - they were violent. Italian political system, on the other hand, is characterized by a mix of centralization and decentralization with far greater powers delegated at regional and local levels. The attitude towards challengers in Italy, moreover, has been historically more volatile with degrees of openness and closeness depending on specific government configurations. With regard to similarities, both countries are examples of *democratic malaise*, reporting particularly low scores in citizens' political trust in the functioning of the democracy. In the mid-2010s, they both experienced a noteworthy shift in their traditional bipolar party-competition dynamics, signalled by the decline of mainstream left-right parties and the emergence of new political players, the anti-establishment Five Star Movement in Italy and the centrist *La Republic en marche*! Macron's party in France. Notably, both countries held post-pandemic elections in 2022, which, although marked by a different results, attested to the rise of far-right forces. Finally, both countries were heavily affected by the pandemic with high number of deaths. In coherence with differences in their backgrounds, crisis management was more executive-centred in France, while in Italy greater power was delegated at regional level. While the set of containment measures was very similar, differences lied in the stringency of the measures, more severe in France than in Italy. Moreover, the societal effects diverged, with Italians rallying around the government amidst uncertainty while the French displayed a more critical stance toward Macron's crisis management.

As far as the social movement milieu is concerned, Italy and France are marked by two lively progressive fronts though with significant distinctions. In terms of progressive-movements-party relationships, France has historically enjoyed from the existence of a strong institutional left. While this aspect per se did not come with straightforward movement-parties alliances, it represented an opening in terms of the possibility to be influential. On the contrary, despite its roots being closely related to the Italian left, the left-libertarian – or, today, progressive – front suffered from a long-run weakening of the left-wing parties which translated in the absence of a leftist institutional referent. In terms of social movement actors, France has a long-run tradition of contentious mobilisations favoured by the convergence of otherwise fragmented movement organisations around transversal issues. In Italy, instead, distinct social actors have been very active within the boundaries of their own conflictual field, rarely able to converge and to build a cross-cutting themes. In both cases, the pandemic out-broke in a moment of visibility for the progressive side though on different issues. In France, this front was represented by both the broad societal mobilisations against the plan for the

pension reform and by the Yellow Vests movements[42]. In Italy, the progressive front, equally scattered around fields of contention, more recently found a common terrain of struggle in the opposition to the backlash represented by the surge of the far-right in the country – epitomized by the rise of Salvini leadership. The overall contextual characteristics depicted make France and Italy relevant countries for the analysis of progressive social movements organisations change.

[42] I recognise the controversy in arguing for a supposed "progressiveness" of the Yellow Vests. I consider them as such inasmuch as they articulate social justice and pro-democracy claims.

CHAPTER 5

Antecedent conditions matter

pre-pandemic characteristics of social movement organisations in Milan and Paris

5.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the case studies at the centre of this research. Specifically, it outlines their features as of before the pandemic outbreak. This task inserts within my analytical framework whereby I conceive patterns of change as dependent upon the combination between antecedent conditions and pandemic-related mechanisms. This implies that in order to properly understand actors' post-pandemic trajectories, it is crucial to first delve into their starting pre-pandemic conditions. This is precisely what this chapter is dedicated to. The chapter is divided in two sections, 5.2 and 5.3, respectively dedicated to progressive social movement organisations in city of Paris and in the city of Milan. In each section, the illustration of pre-pandemic characteristics of the cases proceed according to a case by case presentation. The roots of actors, their sector of mobilisations as well as identity and organization-related aspects are put under the spotlight. The final section 5.4 concludes the chapter by comparing cases per dimensions. In particular, I look comparatively at collective identity, strategy, repertoire of action and reaction to Covid-19.

5.2 Progressive social movement organisations in Paris

The cases belonging to the Parisian social movement milieu are the Inter-professional collective of the 18th district, Yellow Vests, Extinction Rebellion Paris North, Nous Toutes Paris North, 'Droit au logement' and the Brigades of Popular Solidarity. The sub-sections below briefly reconstruct their roots and shed light on their main characteristics.

5.2.1 Interpro of 18eme

The Interpro of the 18th arrondissement is a political collective based in the XVIII^{éme} arrondissement, a multicultural district in the North of Paris, characterized by its working-class and popular roots. The origins of the collective date back to 2019, when a group of neighbourhood

militants already active on a myriad of issues and sectors converged against Macron's plan of pension reform in 2019. The genesis of the collective was therefore completely bottom-up, constituted by a long-run network of informal relationships among neighbourhood militants and the main French trade union, la *Confederation General du Travail* (CGT). These groups had previously collaborated on numerous urban struggles long before 2019. As cases in point, in 2017, there had been a mobilisation against the closure of a EDF (Electircitè De France, the national electricity company) local facility that provided services to people for bills, in collaboration with the CGT of EDF, while in 2018 neighbourhood activists converged for protesting against the Blanquer School reform, again in synergy with the CGT, section education. Contentious actions had been mounted on antiracist claims as well. For example, local activists created the collective "ZSP18 - Zone de Solidarité Populaire - Paris 18e" (area of popular solidarity, Paris 18e), out of the establishment of a migration camp at La Chapelle - a neighbourhood within the 18e arrondissement known for its diverse population – struggling for the regularisation of undocumented migrants and mobilising on antiracist and solidarity claims. Therefore, in 2019, when the plan for the pension reform was proposed, there was already a milieu of contentious social capital in the 18e arrondissement, still not assembled in a common framework but organized into several different collectives of militants struggling for social justice claims starting from ad-hoc local issues. In autumn 2019, these scattered cells and activists converged around the same collective, an 'inter-professional collective', the so-called '*interpro du 18eme*' with the aim of organizing resistance to the pension reform. To this aim, they convinced the CGT to open a local section in the arrondissement with the aim to use it as the meeting place for organising the opposition to the pension reform at local level. The Interpro therefore was the product of the network of so-far informal relationships among neighbourhood activists, unionized and not unionized, organized in political parties and not, who opened their ranks to individuals from the neighbourhood without any militancy experience but interested in participating in the movement. Therefore, at the dawn of the pandemic, the *Interpro du 18e^{me}* grouped all the workers based at the arrondissement level and was specifically committed to organize contentious actions against the pension reform. Its members range between 60 and 80. Activities included leafleting, local marches, putting up posters. Internal tensions had been present before the pandemic regarding the scope of the mobilization, with the majority in favour of restricting it to the professional sectors already in strike, while a radical minority advocating for expanding the mobilization beyond-workers to include broader publics at local level. The outbreak of the pandemic put the anti-pension reform movement in standby and generated internal cleavages on the appropriate course of action at Interpro level. Eventually, a radical left minority remained active and engaged in putting up posters throughout the neighbourhood to contest State

management of the pandemic. Given the decline of the movement and the ensuing need to find a different name than “Interpro”, those remained active decided to call themselves “18eme en lutte” (“18th neighbourhood in struggle”).

5.2.2 Yellow Vests of Montreuil

The second case considered is the Yellow Vests movement (YV), one of the largest and most notable mass mobilisations over recent years in France, sparked in late 2018 by opposition to a carbon tax and evolved into a movement on economic justice and pro-democracy concerns[43]. This paper zooms in on the group of the Yellow Vests of Montreuil, one of the ones remained most active at Parisian metropolitan level. Montreuil is a commune in the eastern suburbs of Paris and it is known for its diverse population, working-class origins and a very active social movement landscape. Its pre-pandemic trajectory can be analysed by distinguishing into three phases. The first one spans from the foundation of the group in autumn 2018 to March 2019; the second one from March 2019 to October 2019; and the third one from October 2019 to March 2020, when the pandemic hit. The initial phase corresponds to the group's establishment in late 2018, as a direct local emanation of the Yellow Vests movement which had begun to proliferate throughout the country from its rural areas. At the very beginning, the Yellow Vests in Montreuil did not have clear boundaries; more than a group they resembled an agglomerate of people from any walk of life, with and without militancy experience, intrigued to see what was going on. Those early times revolved around weekly reunions in one of Montreuil’s social spaces, La Parole Errante, where around 400 people gathered together to discuss the political, social and economic problems of France and beyond. More than coming up with sophisticated political analyses, the socio economic and political situation of the country was addressed through people’ sharing their personal concerns and grievances. The strategy pursued was to “liberate the word” (I4), however organizationally chaotic it might have turned out to be. In this sense, Montreuil’s Yellow Vests in its genetic phase worked as a deliberative arena to extract the most out of the insurrectional context it inhabited. Specifically, the aim was to try to find a common political language and framework to what people were sharing. “Talking” was the hallmark of Yellow Vests’ action at neighbourhood level as the repertoire of action entailed leafleting, the setting up of a book of grievances (*cahier de doleances*) where people could note what they did not like about French socio-political situation and what they

[43] Since the YV of Montreuil share a leftist background, I conceptualised them as a progressive social movement organization . However, I acknowledge the limited applicability of this conceptualization the overall movement, which has been defined rather as “populist” (Bergem 2023) for its grassroots origins and capacity to mobilize people both on the right and the left.

wish to change. On the top of that, the group organized demonstrations every Saturday, hence replicating one of Yellow Vests' seminal forms of action.

In 2019, following the example of their countryside peers, they built a cabin near a Montreuil roundabout to make it become a space where people could stop, exchange views and reflect collectively. In this sense, the cabin was conceived as a physical channel of entrance into the Yellow Vests' world. The primary goal during this initial phase before the pandemic was to spread the public outrage that the Yellow Vests had taken to the streets, aiming to engage the maximum number of individuals in the movement. More than engaging in contentious actions, the group's activity focused on debating, sharing and commonly producing knowledge underpinning concrete demands regarding living conditions. The construction of the cabin represented a turning point in Montreuil Yellow Vests' trajectory. First, it yielded the territorial anchoring of the struggle with an ensuing shift to more local-level affairs. Second, it allowed the Yellow Vests to think of themselves beyond the eventfulness of the insurrectional environment in a longer and ordinary timeframe. Therefore, by providing a physical shared space where people spent time, the cabin created relational resources between a core group of 50 activists around which other people gravitated. As such, it transformed the Yellow Vests of Montreuil into a group. The second phase was period of abeyance in action following two occurrences. On the one hand, the Yellow Vests everywhere in France were confronted with great repression translating into police violence and the blessing of many protestors. Eventually, this depressed the movement. On the other, the cabin of Montreuil was erased in August 2019. As a result, the local group was deprived of its operational centre, which resulted in a collective loss of will to continue.

This trend was reversed in October 2019 which opens the third pre-pandemic phase of the Yellow Vest of Montreuil. During this phase, the group was confronted with the dilemma of whether and how to continue acting as Yellow Vests in a context marked by the exhaustion of the movement hence by the overall vanishing of an insurrectional framework. Hence, it marked a period characterized by reflection and debate, in search for a renewed collective legitimacy and a renewed horizon of struggle. The reflection was facilitated by the group's relocation to the AERI, a hub for the organisation of the political and cultural social movement scene of Montreuil. Strategy followed the change in context: no longer a spread of the insurrectional virus but a further inscription within the militant fabric of Montreuil. In terms of repertoire of action, they created a canteen which served dishes from discarded food at free price once a week. The canteen played a pivotal role in fortifying the connections among activists, essential not only for upholding the resilience of Montreuil's Yellow Vests through macro-level changes, but also for capitalizing on the chance to entrench their activity into the AERI's network. Moments of latency intertwined with moments of

visibility, aligning with wider cycles of confrontations that the Yellow Vests seized upon by manifesting their intrinsic essence: "taking to the streets, occupying public spaces, and protesting" (IR7 – Yellow Vests of Montreuil), as was vividly illustrated in their to the movement against the plan for the pension reform in 2019. Yet, the new struggle horizon created also internal cleavages between those in favour of this evolution and those still linked to faded insurrectional context, who eventually left the group. Therefore, the Yellow Vest had just embarked on this new phase and specifically they had only organized two canteens when the pandemic hit. During the pandemic, the Yellow Vests of Montreuil did not act at collective level and suspended their activities, including weekly group meetings. The only form of action that persisted was the canteen in synergy with the Brigade of Popular Solidarity (BSP), born in Montreuil and located at AERI with the aim of organizing popular self-defence against the emergency through food distribution of people in need.

5.2.3 Extinction Rebellion France: the Paris North group

Extinction Rebellion is a transnational civil disobedience movement fighting against ecological collapse and climate disruption. It was launched in October 2018 in the UK and soon spread following the call by English activists to rebel worldwide. XR France was born in November 2018 in direct response to this call. As it reads from their website, the early step for the constitution of the French movement was the implementation of online tools for interested individuals to join XR and participate in its formation. The very creation of the movement on the French soil was therefore a bottom-up participatory process facilitated by digital tools that enabled the realization of XR's fundamental organizational principles: horizontal structure, decentralization, and autonomy. This embryonic online organization had its offline consecration on 24th March 2019, when several hundred activists and sympathizers gathered in Place de la Bourse and declared “the rebellion”, namely, the existence of XR in France and its joining of the fight alongside Extinction Rebellion collectives that already existed elsewhere in the world. The overall movement builds upon 10 common principles and 4 claims that make up for a general framework in terms of strategic orientation and internal functioning. The four demands are 1) recognizing the severity and the urgency of the current ecological crisis and communicating with honesty on this 2) immediate reduction of greenhouse gas emissions to achieve carbon neutrality by 2025, through reduced consumption and planned energy descent 3) the immediate halt of the destruction of oceanic and terrestrial ecosystems, which is causing a massive extinction of the world's living organisms 4) the establishment of a citizens' assembly tasked with deciding on the measures to be implemented to achieve these objectives and ensuring a fair and equitable transition. Hence, XR's objectives extend beyond the mere ecological realm and underscore the systemic nature of ecology. Addressing the

ecological emergency necessitates a comprehensive response that encompasses the social, economic, and political domains. While having this as a common overarching framework for action, the movement is organized in more than 100 local groups, necessary to better manage an increasing number of activists and to create a capillary context-based anchoring. Organization per decentralized and autonomous groups allowed for an effective context-tailored action, really grounded in local bottom-up problems. In total, Ile-de-France region has 7 regional sub-groups, each of which has its own local groups. Paris is one sub-regional group and it has 5 local groups organized per territorial proximity: XR Paris Nord, XR Paris West, XR Paris East, XR Paris Centre, XR Paris rive gauche. Zooming closer to the group taken into consideration for this thesis, Paris North was founded in June 2019. Its constitution dates back to the trajectory above described: a loosely defined group of activists who decided to start self-organizing having the north of Paris as its base for practical reasons. The pre-pandemic period was therefore devoted to the constitution of the group, with activists deciding what to do and how to do it, trying to take advantage of the room of manoeuvre granted them by the autonomous and decentralised organizational structure of the movement. The pre-Covid-19 phase of Paris north group can be depicted taking one protest event as watershed: the “Rébellion Internationale d’Octobre" (RIO) in October 2019. This event marked an international day of action with different simultaneous blockings in several countries. The central event in France was a one-week occupation of Châtelet Square with the idea of raising awareness about a still young movement by setting up different initiatives like ateliers, training sessions and citizens assemblies. Interestingly enough, the event has remained so deeply ingrained in the collective memory of the movement to be abridged by activists with the metonymy of "Châtelet”, its location (de Moor and Wahlström 2019). Taking Châtelet as a watershed, XR Paris North group focused first on the preparation for Châtelet and then on managing the consequences of it. Preparation involved both organizing and actively participating in direct actions to become familiar with the practice of civil disobedience, nurture interpersonal connections, and be ready to face potential legal repercussions. These elements were regarded as essential building blocks for cultivating collective confidence in the practice of disobedience[44], the core of Extinction Rebellion strategy. Châtelet’s consequences entailed an exponential increase in participation which required the group to establish a more structured organization in order to avoid power takeovers and being effective from an action point of view. Setting up an internal “système d'auto-organisation” (SAO) via the progressive distribution of group responsibilities through short-term mandates, assigned per

[44] An example of civil disobedience initiatives are anti-pub (“anti-publicité”) actions to draw attention to issues related to invasive advertising or the negative impact of advertising on the environment. They comprised a wide range of actions varying for their risk level: removing advertising material from billboards; covering billboards with a substance resembling fake blood to symbolize the negative role of advertising in the environment up to physically attaching oneself to billboards as a form of protest.

a system of "elections without candidates"[45] was regarded as a crucial stepping stone for achieving horizontality, autonomy and action effectiveness. Furthermore, previously sporadic actions were formalized, becoming weekly routines with dedicated mandates established to oversee their organization. Despite the quest for horizontality and self-organization, XR is a movement organizationally complex with the national and local level, the offline and online participation often intertwining. In this sense, participants in weekly assemblies do not reflect the entirety of rebels active in that group; attending group meetings is indeed just one mode within a larger spectrum of involvement.

When the pandemic hit, the group was therefore managing the after-Chatelet, with approximately a total amount of 200 people revolving around XR via meetings and actions. During the lockdown, the organization of the group's life went online. Rebels organized conferences on the pandemic and its link with the ecological issue, trainings and welcoming of new activists, as well as planned actions for when the lockdown would be lifted. More than addressing the State-management of the crisis, in the admits of early days' institutional communication uncertainty, managing the emotional consequences of Covid-19 on militants was the priority concern of the movement the lockdown was imposed. This was in line with the premise of the regenerative culture, one of the pillars of XR. Regenerative culture refers to a set of practices and principles that focus on supporting the well-being, resilience, and sustainability of activists and the movement itself[46].

5.2.4 Nous Toutes Paris North

Nous Toutes ("All of us – women") is a French feminist movement that emerged in 2018 in response to the #MeToo movement and the increasing awareness of gender-based violence and discrimination in France. It defines itself as a national feminist collective, bringing together citizens, associations, trade unions, and political organizations. Since its foundation in summer 2018, it has evolved into the foremost feminist movement in France. Its genesis coincided with the momentum generated by the #Metoo campaign, which had brought the issue of sexual violence at the centre of the societal debate. The birth of the movement hence was rooted in a climate become discursively fertile and permeable to gender issues. In November 2018, the movement organised its first protest action on the occasion of the international day against women's violence garnering some 600 people in Paris and a total of 4,000 across France. As it reads from its website:

[45] In order to be assigned an internal task, activists were designated by the group and voted. Examples of internal mandates include: internal and external coordination, welcoming new arrivals.

[46] Examples include action and post-action and beyond action emotional support to activists.

“The #NousToutes collective was born in July 2018 with the intention of creating a surge that would bring together all possible forces to denounce sexist and sexual violence. Representing various aspects of the feminist struggle, activists, associations, unions, and political parties joined forces for the first major French march around this common cause.”

(Nous Toutes website)

At the time of the first march, the movement lacked a grassroots structure and the news of the action day was relayed through social media. In January 2019, riding the momentum signalled by the portentous participation during the November 2018 march, reunions were organized at Ile de France level to create local committees. It was in that context that the Paris North local group, on which the present research focuses on, was mounted. Over time, the level of rootedness in the territory has increased and today Nous Toutes is organized into committees by city, department, school, university. The movement has a chart, co-created by the national level of the movement and grassroots participants, specifying two major objectives orienting its action: (i) to raise awareness on sexist and sexual violence via actions, communications and training; (ii) to demand effective public policies on the topic. Early repertoire of action included leafleting, postering and streets renaming in addition to the annual marches for the 8th March and 25th November. Like in the case of Extinction Rebellion, Nous Toutes made of offline concrete actions the hallmark of its strategy until the pandemic outbreak. Their contentiousness indeed lied in very act of reclaiming the occupation of physical public space by women. Actions are initiated by activists and sometimes relayed and coordinated nationally.

Narrowing the attention to the Paris North local committee, taken into consideration for this research, some peculiarities must be highlighted. Until the pandemic outbreak, the group was marked by high turnover rates which hindered the consolidation of a core group of activists. Its activity was organized via monthly reunions yet lacking a general strategy, which resulted in a difficulty in organizing actions. Specifically, throughout 2019, the group had difficulties in organizing actions given a weak organizational structure whereby action organization rested solely on the former group’s leader. This impasse was overcome at the beginning of 2020 thank to the the appointment of a new coordinator. Her promotion of a within-group organizational decentralisation – as opposed to the strong early centralisation - resulted in an increase in the number of actions. A new organization model via roles distribution within the group was seen as purposeful to two objectives. First, it aimed to empower activists to act as part of NT by managing actions on the ground. Second, it aimed to increase engagement and to allow the movement to ‘stand on its own’ irrespective of participation turnover. The strategy proved successful and the committee organised a plethora of actions between January and February 2020, which contributed to strengthen relational

bonds among a core group of 20 militants. At the same time, right before the pandemic outbreak, the local committee had launched an Instagram page to gain online visibility, resonance, and recruit more people. Therefore, Covid-19 hit the local committee Nous Toutes Paris North during early experimentation with a new organizational model and in a momentous phase of visibility. During the pandemic, the organization of the group went online. Paris North lockdown-contingent actions included: monthly zoom meetings; raising awareness on the heightened risks of domestic violence during home confinement through Instagram posts; distributing posters to open businesses with emergency contact numbers for cases of violence, and online training sessions on sexual and sexist violence in collaboration with Nous Toutes' national committee.

5.2.5 DAL: right to housing

Droit au logement – Right to housing – is an association created in 1990 to defend the housing right. DAL's foundation is to be contextualised within the '90s neoliberal turn in social policy and within the ensuing mobilisations of "those without" ("*les sans"*, See Chapter 4). In particular, DAL's very creation dates back to the settlement of a four-month-long camp in the 20th arrondissement (Nation square) by grassroots activists and 48 households who had been evicted in May 1990 from two squatted buildings. The encampment and protests attracted intense media coverage and garnered broad support from the local community, various associations, labour unions, left-wing and far-left political parties. Government appointed a mediator to resolve the conflict without the use of force and families were eventually provided with housing solutions. This founding act is particularly telling of the constitutive characteristics of DAL. DAL is indeed an association struggling to defend the rights of people experiencing housing difficulties (*les mal-logés*) or homeless (*sans-abri*). This aim is pursued by means of collective action aiming to both provide concrete solutions to those in conditions of need and exert pressure on government to give housing responses. Repertoire of actions include demonstrations, encampments, , self-requisitions of vacant housing, social media campaigns and a desk to assist with housing-related procedures. DAL's strategy consists in amplifying the resonance of its actions in order to channel the political debate on the housing issue and prompt high-level governmental responses. Glaring evidence of this is provided by the spectacular and highly publicized occupation of Rue du Dragon in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés neighbourhood in Paris in 1994. The action attracted the active participation of prominent figures of that time, including artists, intellectuals, and members of various organizations, and played a pivotal role in the formulation of emergency measures and legislative projects. As the episode shows, the reliance on a support network involving a wide range of individuals and organizations is a further strategic element it employs to enhance the likelihood of

success. Overall, DAL's objectives is to unite and organize the poorly housed, homeless, and tenants to obtain the relocation of those facing housing exclusions, the improvement of the housing legislation – most notably the enforcement of the law concerning the requisition of vacant buildings and housing[47] – and to increase public awareness on the housing crisis[48]. DAL is organised in local committees, the majority scattered around Paris and its surroundings plus about thirty established in other cities in France. Organized in coordination, they came together under the Federation of Right to Housing Committees in 1998, based on a common charter. For this research, I focused on the main committee of DAL situated in the centre of Paris "DAL Paris 75 et environs". The committee holds help desk activities three times per week while once in a month it organizes

At the outbreak of the pandemic, DAL, as many other actors explored in this chapter, adapted. Adaptation took various forms. First, help-desk services were suspended and were progressively rearranged via a telephonic format. Second, DAL volunteers were granted special permits in order to provide assistance to families in buildings that DAL had squatted beforehand. Third, DAL shared a series of propositions and concrete actions "in order for war to Covid-19 not to become a war to the poor", as it reads from DAL's website. It launched in particular the campaign "In support of a rent moratorium, we are suspending our rent!" encouraging people who couldn't afford to pay rent and those who could – as an act of solidarity – to suspend their payments. Furthermore, it initiated an online petition directed at President Macron, demanding exceptional measures to safeguard the vulnerable individuals who were at a higher risk of COVID-19 and its socioeconomic repercussions due to their precarious housing conditions. In particular, it requested i) the immediate requisition of vacant properties owned by large landlords, Airbnb rentals, vacant hotels for the homeless and those with extremely inadequate housing as well as victims of domestic violence; ii) a rent moratorium and an enhanced restoration of housing assistance (APL) for tenants iii) a moratorium on bills for those with insufficient or decreasing incomes; iv) the cease of evictions. These four policy proposals were advocated for in various manners. First, DAL was among the signatory actors of a letter to the Minister of Urban Affairs and Housing. Simultaneously, the same coalition, called upon the State Council for an urgent review of a motion containing DAL's suggested measures to establish housing solutions that safeguard the health of homeless and inadequately housed individuals. Furthermore, DAL issued press releases to highlight government response deficiencies concerning the living conditions of individuals without housing or those residing in collective

[47] Being these buildings owned by local authorities, government agencies, banks, insurance companies, large property owners and real estate professionals.

[48] Examples include analyses on Paris housing crisis and a website section were all the knowledge on housing right is stocked, i.e. a guide on "what to do" in case of in case of receiving an eviction notice, figures on the number of evictions, on the growth of rent prices and also a section on the competences of the mayors and local authorities to curb State-sponsored evictions.

accommodations and engaged in press reviews to highlight the major measures taken in this regard by other countries. In order to sustain these demands despite the limits posed by the pandemic, DAL called its adherents to a series of mobilisation among which: window protest to make noise "for the homeless, poorly housed, tenants, and the right to housing for all"; encouraging tenants living in the same apartment building not to pay rent for solidarity or necessity; and hanging banners and posters with slogans on windows and balconies and sending photos or videos of them to a common mail address in order to spread the message.

5.2.6 Brigades of Popular Solidarity

The *Brigades of Popular Solidarity* ("Brigades de solidaritè populaire", BSP) are ad-hoc groups born in the context of Covid crisis to provide concrete answers to pandemic-related needs. They were organized in France during the first lockdown in March 2020 following a call for action of "the comrades in Milan" – as it reads form their Instagram page - which had mounted the Brigades shortly beforehand. In this sense, their French development can be regarded as a case of transnational diffusion of the initiative (Wüest and Enggist 2020). Their creation dates back to a call for collective solidarity disseminated on 3rd April 2020 on the website acta.fr by militants defining themselves as "revolutionary activists from the recent cycle of movements - from the springtime struggle against the Labor Law to the Yellow Vests uprising" (Acta.fr – 03/04/2020). Rather than originating in a vacuum, indeed, their emergence was facilitated by the re-activation of different pre-existing movement cultures and networks - radical, autonomous, libertarian and antifascist milieus - mobilized right before the pandemic during the 2019 anti-pension protest movement. Hence, brigades founders had a background of political militancy and were already active in other locally-rooted movement networks. Overall, 17 Brigades were mounted at Paris metropolitan level while others were founded in several cities across France like Lyon, Nantes and Marseille. The BSP in Paris spread and remained fully in activity until the end of the first lockdown. After the relaxation of restrictive measures in summer 2020, most BSPs ceased their activities; however, three of them persisted and continued their operations in the post-pandemic period. These three have been selected as case studies for this research: the BSP of Aubervilliers- Pantin, the BSP of Paris Sud and the BSP in Montreuil.

While I analyze the Brigades as a collective actor, it is important to note that they are locally rooted and structured by neighbourhood-based groups. Each Brigade tailored its activities to the characteristics of the local contexts in which they operate. For example, the provision of help took different forms according to the local challenges and opportunities. Some BSP did not target families but mainly immigrant workers' foyers, squats, while others, like the Paris Sud Brigade,

established a solidarity kitchens or, like the Brigade of Aubervilliers, primarily acted through street outreach initiatives – i.e. by distributing small meal baskets to homeless people. The local opportunity structure was of outmost importance because it influenced BSPs' action repertoire, trajectories and ultimate post-emergency survival. For example, the BSP of Aubervilliers organised food collection points in a local associative café which opened its doors whilst the lockdown to support the initiative; the BSP of Montreuil could operate thanks to the availability of AERI, a local shared spaced used by different local movement organizations.

In terms of repertoire of action, the BSPs employed first and foremost the means of direct social action via the distribution of food, clothing and hygiene products to aggrieved people. As such, they tried to combine a humanitarian with a political logic. The latter is well summarized by their guiding motto "only the people save the people" (*seule le peuple sauve le peuple*) which singled out the political value of bottom up self-organisation as opposed to top-down neoliberal policies. The beyond-assistance nature of the BSPs is evident in the framing they made of the health crisis. As it reads from the call to action, indeed, popular self-organization on a territorial basis was necessary as "the government is not a solution to the health crisis because it is at the service of a system based on profit and private interest which is the primary culprit of the disaster we found ourselves" (acta.fr, 03/04/2020). The pandemic was therefore seen as a favourable opportunity to construct prefigurative counter powers from below. By providing material help, the Brigades promoted the construction of political solidarities whereby individuals ideally connected, shared their experiences and built a common understanding of the situation they were facing. Direct social action was conducted along with more manifestly contentious forms of actions such as protest actions. For instance, the BSP organized an un-authorized market in the central square of Montreuil on 1^{rst} May 2020 to denounce surging profits of large retailers vis-à-vis escalating pandemic-driven grievances. In organizing demonstrations, BSPs networked with other collectives pertaining to the radical left political spectrum, most notably the Gilet Noirs – a radical autonomous collective of undocumented migrants - the network of solidarity canteens, Committees of families victims of police violence and AFA – Antifascist Action Paris. This highlights that, despite originating as ad-hoc initiatives, the BSPs were firmly embedded within the local social movement landscape and engaged in different struggles, particularly those more proximate to the geographical areas where they operated.

It is worth noting that attempts were made to establish a top-down led organisation of civic mobilisation during the lockdown. The launch of the online platform jeveuxaider.gouv was aimed to connect fragmented forces with existing structures with the goal of bolstering their ranks and ensuring the provision of essential aid. However, this form of coordination was rejected by the Brigades, framing it as a government demand for civil society to develop forms of solidarity that the

government itself cannot provide. Therefore, BSPs maintain a high degree of autonomy and contrary to the BVE in Milan, they did not have any relationship with political institutions or other large movement actors. Another difference with their Milanese counterparts is that BSP lack a central organization at city level. They have a coordination body but it has no specific status and primarily acts as a hub for sharing information about certain common actions. At the end of the chapter, Table 3 sums up the main features of the French SMOs considered in this study, per dimension.

5.3 Progressive social movement organisations in Milan

The progressive social movement organizations belonging to the Milanese movement scene and considered in this work are four social centres (Lambretta, Collective Zam, Riamke and Spazio 20092) and the city group of Extinction Rebellion. For their belonging to the same type of organization, a brief description of social centres is provided to give an overarching context of the movement milieu these cases are rooted in (5.3.1). After having set the stage in this regard, the sub-section proceeds by delving into the characteristics of each of specific organization. It then explores the features of Extinction Rebellion Milan, while it concludes with a description of the emergence of the Voluntary Solidarity Brigades during the pandemic (5.3.3). As regards this latter actor, I specify that the Brigades in this thesis are not treated as collective actor per se but as forms of action adopted by some social centres in pandemic times[49]. However, delving into their origin as a unique network rooted in the Milanese pandemic context is necessary to better grasp the challenges and opportunities as well as the dilemmas movement organizations joining them – the social centres indeed - faced over the pandemic course.

5.3.1 Lambretta, Zam, Rimake and Spazio 20092: four examples of social centres in Milan

Lambretta, Zam, Rimake and Spazio 20092 are social centres (CS) in Milan. *Centri Sociali* have a long tradition in Italy – with around 150 social centres to date . Their rise originated from the social and political turmoil of the late ‘70s when the transition from Fordism to flexible accumulation brought students and workers to engage in massive political action all over the country (Ruggiero 2000). In that context, the Italian movement of the *centri sociali* (“self-managed social centres”) originated in Milan – for then spreading in other Italian cities in the 80s - from the extra-parliamentary left (with a great initial influence by Workers’ Autonomy – Autonomia Operaia –

[49] Throughout the empirical part, indeed, when referring to social movement organizations choosing to ‘adopt the Brigades’ I am specifically referring to movement organizations that chose to engage in direct social action by joining the Voluntary Brigades' network.

movement network) to provide a self-managed response to the disappearance of traditional public spaces and to the inability of traditional left-wing to address new social and political demands. The movement therefore stood out from the start for its strong antagonism to delegation and representative democracy (considered instruments for absorbing social dissent), for employing organizational models typical of participatory and direct democracy and for the adoption of non-conventional forms of action (Mudu 2012). In particular, squatting public places and the practice of occupation of empty buildings were at the core of *centri sociali* action as part of a process of 'reclaiming the city' (Piazza 2012). Indeed, the disappearance of public space in favour of privatization and the inability of traditional left-wing parties to create new contexts for social and political action pushed the youth to imagine alternative places of aggregation and activism. CS hence gave expression to a double need. On the one hand, they represented non-hierarchical spaces where to cultivate communal social, political and cultural life from the grassroots, on the basis of a set of shared values and beliefs and in opposition to institutional politics. On the other, by liberating public or private empty properties to give them back to the community, they acted as bulwarks against the neoliberal commodification of the urban fabric – whose Milan, the "shop window city" is a paramount example of (Bellotto 2022). These tasks were carried out first of all at local level. All CS have strong local identities and they focus on enacting change in a prefigurative way within the communities they inhabit.

Due to their close linkages with the neighbourhood-based realities in which they emerge, CS can be very different from each other. Nevertheless, they share some elements that make them a distinctive political phenomenon. Beyond the common political background and overarching objectives above depicted, all CS mobilise on similar topics. These include more general themes such as antifascism, antiracism, environmental issues, feminism, students' and workers' rights to a narrower focus on local problems relevant to the city – or the part of city – in which they operate (Dines 1999; Berzano and Gallini 2000). Repertoire of action includes awareness campaigns, fundraising, direct social actions (Giannini and Pirone 2019), demonstrations, sit-ins, all of this in network with other far left local actors. Moreover, as extremely politicised spaces, they organize accessible social and cultural initiatives such as book presentations, theatre performances, community-led gyms, neighbourhood dinners screenings with the aim of providing free or cheap events to the neighbourhood communities, especially in marginalized urban areas affected by social and economic problems. In this sense, CS are not only contentious political actors in the urban landscape but also centres of social aggregation, at the same time key locations of contestation but also of community building. Ultimately, *centri sociali* merge social, political and cultural activities with the intent of acting as situated alternative spaces outside the hegemonic capitalist system where

to explore different ways of experiencing the city and building non-commodified social relations (Pecorelli 2015). Italian social centres are movement organizations engaged in local, national, and transnational protest campaigns. A particular consideration must be paid to their role in in the transnational alter-globalization movement, especially during the mobilization days against the G8 in Genoa in July 2001 (Membretti and Mudu 2013) and in the anti-Expo mobilisations in Milan in 2015. These episodes entered the collective memory of the movement because they highlighted the presence of different blocks within the network, diverging in their approach towards the use of violence during demonstrations.

Collettivo Zam, Lambretta, Rimake and Collective 20092 belong to the Milanese social centres scene[50]. They experienced different evictions overtime and are located in different parts of the city: South of Milan, Lambrate, North Milan and Cinisello Balsamo, respectively[51]. Despite having different specific birthdates, these collectives commonly originated from the political and social milieu of Milan in the 2010s, characterized by the student movement against the Gelmini reform (the "Onda anomala" movement), the anti-austerity protests and No Expo demonstrations. They also reacted in the same way to the pandemic, by employing direct social action though in different frameworks. Zam, Lambretta and Collettivo 20092 joined the Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza (Emergency Voluntary Brigades, hereafter BVE), launched in Milan by a group of radical autonomous activists in cooperation with the health-care focused NGO Emergency to distribute packages of food and hygiene products to people in need. Rimake engaged as well in needs provision but maintained autonomy by operating independently of Brigades network in Milan. Differences among the social centres relate to their repertoire of action, which is geographically tailored to the distinct needs of the neighbourhoods each social centre serves, as well as to their pre-pandemic intra-organisation conditions, explained by the specific their pre-pandemic trajectories. The following paragraph zooms in in each of them.

Lambretta is a self-managed social centre born in 2012 with the aim of coordinating students' mobilisations in the North East of Milan. After several evictions, it found its current location in Lambrate in 2018. Over time, this traditional social centre has undergone evolution, becoming deeply embedded in citywide mobilizations. Right before the pandemic, its work revolved mainly around climate mobilisations in collaboration with students' movement networks (e.g. "Link") and

[50] As suggested by Piazza and Frazzetta (2022), I acknowledge that the way of naming these type of occupations has progressively tried to avoid the use of the label 'social centre' to make way for other types of labels and names like liberated spaces, social labs, social spaces, commons. For the purposes of this work, I mean these different labels to indicate the same type of political subjects.

[51] Data on these collectives were collected between May and December 2022. Notably, Rimake and Collective 20092 have been evicted in July 2022 and January 2023, respectively. The former has currently no location while the latter has squatted another space in Cinisello Balsamo.

Fridays for future. Repertoire of action entailed mainly contentious actions in the forms of demonstrations and protests. An aspect worth mentioning regards what activists defined as an “internal crisis” (I1- Lambretta) Lambretta was undergoing before the pandemic outbreak, which eventually resulted in internal divisions, with a part of the collective withdrawing. In March 2020, it joined the BVE network with the foundation of the Brigade Lena Modotti (an Italian partisan), engaged in the delivery of food packages to families in need. In the wake of that experience, in July 2020 Lambretta founded the association Mutuo Soccorso Milano (hereinafter, MSM). MSM entailed 3 distinct projects: “Zone 2” and “Zone 3”, which focused on distributing food packages in Milan's Zone 2 and Zone 3, respectively; “"Drago Verde," dedicated to providing hot meals to homeless individuals in Milan city centre; and “Comida”, and "Comida," involving the collaborative preparation of these meals, subsequently distributed to the homeless by ‘Drago Verde’.

Collective Zam was established in 2011 in Barona neighbourhood in the South of Milan, an area with a strong antifascist and working-class tradition. "Zam" stands for "Zona Autonoma Milano" (Autonomous Zone Milan). The self-identification as an "autonomous zone" is a way to distance itself from traditional social centres, often seen as marginalized enclaves closed off from the outside world. Instead, claiming as "autonomous zone" directly alludes to the collective's deep connections to the neighbourhood. Collective Zam indeed does not only want to act as a self-managed liberated space in itself, autonomous from predatory, commodified logics and hierarchical functioning, but to bring these political beliefs beyond the physical boundaries of its space to the neighbourhood – i.e. from the creation of an “autonomous space” to the creation of an “autonomous zone”. Before the pandemic, Zam’s activity focused at the same time on political elaboration – with a specific focus on antifascism- and on the reconstitution of the social fabric via social and cultural activities in the territory of South Milan, also in network with other local grassroots actors (like the social centre GTA - Gratosoglio Autogestita, which Zam helped to squat).

Spazio 20092 (or, alternatively, Collective 20092) is situated in the Milan metropolitan area within the municipality of Cinisello Balsamo, to the northeast of Milan. It was squatted in 2015 to work as a housing occupation within the housing right movement. The movement, comprising families and individuals in need of housing, as well as activists advocating for housing rights, had a longstanding tradition in the territory of Cinisello due to its substandard living conditions, particularly in the realm of social housing. In addition to its objective of providing an emergency response to the housing issue from below, Spazio was also conceived function as a social centre, thus addressing

the broader necessity for an alternative self-managed social and political space in the city. The space was managed by weekly assemblies with the participation of both militants of the collective and Spazio inhabitants to discuss about both concrete space management issues and political activities planning. Families were hosted under the condition to participate in at least one weekly assembly, in order to reduce the purely service-oriented nature of sheltering and empower residents as active participants in the space they live in. This aligned with the Collective's ultimate political objective of spurring beneficiaries' activation on their needs.

Pre-pandemic repertoire of action comprised a wide range of direct social actions, including social housing to those in need, operating a help-desk on housing issue, and offering Italian language course for migrants. These endeavors were complemented by the more traditional activities of a social centre, such as producing pamphlets and political analyses, particularly focusing on the state of housing right in Milan as well as protest actions to prompt local institutions to take action on the matter. Differently from Lambretta and Zam, indeed, Spazio, driven by the immediate housing concerns it addressed, has always engaged in contentious actions and moments of public denunciation with the aim of initiating discussions with the municipal authorities. For the purposes of this work, attention must be drawn to the fact that before the pandemic Spazio was undergoing a phase of decline for two years. In 2017, indeed, Spazio was filling up very quickly out of the dramatic increase of evictions for innocent rent arrears in Cinisello. Many families were left with no house, alternatives or support from the institutions. Since Spazio had already reached its full hosting capacity, the collective organised the squatting of another building in order to respond to evicted people's housing need. However, the squatting was short-lived and it soon got evicted. An activist root back to that experience the beginning of the decrease of collective's energies:

"after that moment there was a wane because for me also others among us expected a greater activation by inhabitants or by people in need of a house. Instead, there was little participation to that squatting and we found ourselves to defend a very big place with few people, then the eviction came soon so, yes, there was a wane that lasted a year and a half, there were always activities but the core group of the collective reduced from 10 to 5".

(I4 – Collective 20092 activist)

This excerpt gives us two crucial insights to insert our collective actor into a pre-pandemic scenario. First of all, it identifies the "wane" of the collective with the reduction of the number of activists. At the outbreak of the pandemic, therefore, the Collective was participant-poor, which reverberated at affective level into de-energizing group feelings. This drove an overall decrease of the contentious part of the collective's activity, which resulted in a more *intra moenia* phase with less actions on the territory. At the pandemic outbreak, the collective acted upon the internal priority to ensure the

health safety within the space, which, as a squatted property was very likely to remain outside the established aid channels activated by the Civil Protection. Only in December 2020, Spazio 20092 joined the Voluntary Solidarity Brigades with its own Brigade Orso[52] (named after Lorenzo Orsetti, an Italian guerrilla that fought with Kurdish militia during the Syrian civil war).

Rimake, as it reads from its website, is a "commons, a network of solidarity and mutual aid projects. It is a reclaimed space" (Rimake website, accessed 03/01/2024). It was founded in 2013 by a militant network composed of students, a feminist collective and the organization Sinistra Critica ("Critical Left). These subjects gave life to Rimake with the aim of doing politics differently, steering away from the propaganda-like methods of traditional political organizations to start instead fostering relationships within the local community. The social centre changed locations several times before settling in the former Omero high school in Bruzzano neighbourhood, North of Milan, where it remained until summer 2022. Since its relocation there, Rimake, after a path political reflection over the years, invested on mutual aid as a political strategy to rebuild social solidarity, seen as a pre-political condition for political mobilisation (Zamponi 2023). Hence, collectively providing for needs from the bottom-up was seen as strategic upon achieving politically-oriented goals. In terms of repertoire of action, above the social centres-like activities, Rimake belonged to Fuorimercato[53] ("outside market") network and was active on agroecology and sustainable food, hosting once a week a market of local independent producers. Furthermore, prominent attention was place on the feminist issues via the collaboration with the feminist Non una di meno movement and by hosting a women's popular boxing gym in its premises. Direct social actions were at the core of its mutualistic strategy. These included fixed Sunday popular lunches at free price, conceived as moments of alternative sociality and relationship building in the neighbourhood and an Italian course to migrants. Before the pandemic, Rimake had recently initiated the project "Non sei solo/ non sei sola" ("You're not alone"), a collective path of preparation towards the feminist mobilisation of the 8th March 2020. The project originated from the trans-feminist strike of Non Una Di Meno in the process of building the strike. It was a self-training path on labor rights, very focused on gender issues. Rimake's Sunday lunch were interpreted as a day of alternative social reproduction in which to integrate this strike path: there

[52] From the outset, the network of the voluntary solidarity Brigades was a Milan-centred project. Its reach covered the nine municipalities of Milan and did not include the hinterland Cinisello belonged to. As a result, the Brigades did not exist in extra metropolitan areas and the ultimate creation of the Brigade Orso by the collective 20092 took place in December 2020, nine months after the lockdown intense times, proposed by a group of people external to the collective that had close contacts with one of Milan's Brigades.

[53] https://www.fuorimercato.com/

was lunch, a space for childcare and afternoon basic union training sessions on labour-related issues addressing problems raised by both neighbourhood residents and activists.

During the lockdown phase, Rimake transformed its 'You're not alone' project into a coping strategy to address the growing needs of a distressed population. Initially centred around grocery delivery for individuals unable to leave their homes for health reasons, the project evolved over the course of the pandemic. It expanded to include a supportive babysitting service and a housing and trade union help-desk, all grounded in the principles of solidarity and self-help.

5.3.2 Voluntary Emergency Brigades

The Voluntary Emergency Brigades (Brigate Volontarie per l'emergenza, BVE) are a city-wide network of mutual support organized in territorial units, the Brigades. They were created in the early pandemic days in Lombardy, the epicentre of Covid-19 outbreak in Italy and specifically in the city of Milan. Building upon a network among grassroots left-wing militants – mainly active in the Milanese social centres network - and newly joined volunteers, the BVEs emerged with the aim of responding comprehensively across the city territory to the needs of the population. 10 Brigades were created covering the overall metropolitan area of Milan. Acting upon the claim 'from the people, for the people' and driven by an identity constructed around the concepts of care, community and solidarity – as it emerges from their website- , the idea was a bottom-up activation strongly rooted at local level in order to leave no one behind. From the Milanese experience, the Brigades spread in other Italian cities and countries, enabling a large "social movement of mutual support", as they refer to it, to gain momentum.

Initial activities focused on the outskirts and aimed at addressing the most essential needs of residents, including the distribution of masks, hand sanitizers and home delivery of groceries and medications to people in quarantine, immunocompromised, and the elderly. In a second phase, as the lockdown progressed and its socioeconomic consequences intensified, needs shifted from grocery delivery service to *actual* groceries. The distribution of food became hence a priority due to the fact that individuals who had never needed assistance suddenly found themselves without work and income to purchase essential items. The Brigades then initiated fundraising campaigns, recoveries, and food drives – the well-known 'suspended groceries' – to procure food and redistribute it to those who could no longer afford it. They were connected with people in need through the 'Milano aiuta' project, a helpline established by the Municipality of Milan to connect demand and supply of help. At the practical level, Milano Aiuta received requests for assistance and forwarded them to the respective local Brigades. In May 2020, the BVE became part of the 'Nessuno escluso' ('No one excluded') project initiated by the NGO Emergency in collaboration with

the Municipality of Milan. This project was a response to the escalating need for inter-organizational coordination to tackle the evolving and complex needs. Emergency indeed regularly supplied logistic support, training and packages of free food and hygiene products which the BVE had to distribute on a territorial basis to people in need. Overtime, the organizational model of the BVE became more complex[54] and the range of services offered pluralised. Today, the Brigades are a formal association and they run several projects of mutualism, a telephone psychological support service, after-school programs and workshops for children, anti-violence groups for women, theatrical performances in the courtyards of public housing.

5.3.3 Extinction Rebellion Milan

Extinction Rebellion Milan was born in 2019 as part of a worldwide call to action by XR UK. As a local branch of a transnational movement, it shares the overall organizational strategy, principles and objectives of the Extinction Rebellion – so far depicted with regard to XR France. At the outbreak of the pandemic, the group was composed of 15 people and had just finalized its internal organization with the division in thematic subgroups as prescribed by the general guidelines of XR. These entailed a subgroup devoted to action, one covering social media activity and a last one dedicated to what XR calls "regenerative culture", namely addressing the emotional wellbeing of militants. Before the pandemic, XR Milan priorities focused on acquiring visibility and becoming known. One of its activists stated that the group was "trying to find its peculiar way" (I1 - XR). Indeed, notwithstanding the four specific requests advanced by XR movement, each XR group had a relative autonomy in establishing its line of action and priority objectives. XR Milan was in this visibility expansion phase when Covid hit. During this time, group strategically organized various low-risk actions to encourage maximum participation - especially sit-ins – and engaged in sharing raise-awareness contents on the climate crisis in its social media channels, especially Facebook and Instagram. It must be noted that in February 2020, during Milan fashion week - when news about the pandemic started spreading but no official measure had yet been taken to counter it - XR Milan organized an action called "the march of extinct souls". It entailed a march with activists impersonating the souls of the victims the socioecological crisis, including animals and people, denouncing the harmful consequences of the environmental and ecologic crisis. During the first phase of the pandemic, the group focused on social media activism in order to draw attention to the connections between its core issue, the ecological and climate crisis, and the outbreak of the pandemic.

[54] Today, t entails the "Brigades" as organizational units that are structured on a territorial or thematic basis; the "Brigades' Houses", operational bases for solidarity projects; the "Citizen Operational Coordination", composed of the heads of various activities, and the organization's "Directory board".

5.4 Conclusions

This chapter provided a description of the case studies analysed in this dissertation. This was functional upon illuminating their characteristics that in my argument work as 'antecedent conditions', meaning as endogenous factors that supposedly entered into play in influencing actors' medium-term transformation after the pandemic emergency. These include identity and organizational-related elements. Among the latter, I also include the 'previous phase' the actor was experiencing before the pandemic, which can provide us with relevant information on pre-existing resources that might have influenced the trajectory of change. While the corpus of the chapter has followed a case by case presentation, in these conclusions I look at them per cross-cutting dimensions as illustrated in the Table 3 and 4 below, respectively dedicated to Parisian and Milanese cases.

As far as the Parisian cases are concerned, actors look out very different. In terms of collective identity, Yellow Vests and Interpro presented the most heterogeneous constituencies. Interpro was an issue-based actor, combining people of different political orientations yet united in the struggle against the pension reform. Similarly, Yellow Vests of Montreuil gathered people of different ideological backgrounds united around overarching battles like a strive for more social justice and a demand for more direct democracy. A fundamental identity element of the Yellow Vests is a deep distrusts towards representative institutions, seen as corrupted and colluded with strong economic powers. The other actors' collective identities were more homogenous, constructed around the specific issues and claims actors were born for (gender for Nous Toutes; housing rights DAL; climate change Extinction Rebellion). The identity of the Brigades was more or less homogenous as well. Despite not born with reference to a specific issue, the Brigades resulted indeed from the activation of a pre-existing informal movement network pertaining to the far-left, with activists ranging from the antifascist and post-Autonomous political areas. In terms of strategy and repertoire, some distinctions can be made. Nous Toutes, Extinction Rebellion and Interpro relied mainly on offline, protest-based actions, with XR being the most confrontational via civil disobedience practices. The Yellow Vests had recently known a shift in strategy with more emphasis on the rooting at local level and early experiments with direct social action, though the protest-based component of the movement organization had not overall disappeared. The BSPs were precisely born to provide grassroots assistance those in need during the health emergency, hence engaged primarily with direct social action. DAL aimed at raising the attention towards housing-related issues in France and it did so with all the means at its disposal, from squatting of empty buildings, to protest participation, organization of campaigns and direct assistance to poorly housed

people via an help-desk. In terms of organization, all actors included in the sample were informally organized at local level with the exception of DAL which was a formal association. Among the informal group, attention should be placed to XR and NT. Despite being local groups, they were inserted in overarching movement structures which entailed also a national level in the case of NT and a transnational one in the case of XR. Lastly, as specific pre-pandemic phases are concerned, it is worth noticing two aspects. First, the Yellow Vests and Interpro were both marked by significant internal tensions before the pandemic outbreak. Second, Extinction Rebellion and Nous Toutes were experiencing a momentum phase, riding the wave of the respective issues centrality in the public debate. Moreover, the two groups were also commonly in the early phase of a process of organizational decentralisation at internal level.

On the contrary, the Italian cases report a higher degree of homogeneity. This of course is due to the common belonging to the same movement area and for their being all relevant social centres, political collectives or movement groups belonging to the same movement milieu. While collective identity and organization are very similar, some differences can be noticed at the level of strategy and repertoire. Indeed, Lambretta compared to the other cases presented a strategy more based on direct conflict with the State and with its institutions. Hence, it adopted forms of action more confrontational compared to other cases, due also to the fact that its constituency was mostly made of people with a background in radical militancy. In contrast, Zam, Collective 20092 and Rimake had less ideologically marked identities, having all opened to a great or less extent to the surrounding environment in which they were inserted – despite all members on the left of the political spectrum. In terms of repertoire, these latter three had also more or less experience with direct social action. This was at the core of the repertoire of Rimake and also very central in the case of Collective 20092, which hosted individuals in housing need. It was not concretely present, but theoretically thought, in the case of Zam. Before the pandemic, what stand out as relevant was that Lambretta and Collective 20092 were undergoing a phase of decline in material resources and group morale. Rimake, instead, had just started experimenting direct social action according to mutualist principles. Finally, Extinction Rebellion Milan was the newly formed group of the transnational movement Extinction Rebellion. Given its being in its early days, the group was still in a phase of structuring when the pandemic out-broke and, hence, was particularly resource-poor.

Table 3. Antecedent conditions of social movement organizations in Paris: identity, organization and pre-pandemic phase

Movement organization	Collective identity	Strategy	Repertoire of action	Organization	Pre-pandemic phase
Interprofessional collective of 18th neighbourhood	Issue-based actor; Lack of a strong ideological profile; heterogeneity of participants	Organizing neighbourhood-based grassroots resistance with the aim of enlarging the movement beyond professional sectors in struggle	Protest actions; leafleting; local marches; postering	Grassroots organization, strongly rooted at neighbourhood level.	Intense mobilisation in the context of the cycle of contention against the pandemic reform
Yellow Vests of Montreuil	Militants from diverse political cultures on the left with a strong critical attitude toward representative institutions	Rooting in Montreuil social movement milieu.	Protest actions; pickets; leafleting; solidarity kitchen	Informal local node of the broader Yellow Vests movement.	Decline of the overall movement at national level. Internal tensions over the strategic evolution of the group
Popular Solidarity Brigades	Activists from autonomous, libertarian and antifascist movement cultures organising a grassroots response to Covid-emergency	Political prefiguration of the change sought by the BSP. In this sense, means of action express the ends of the movement	Direct social actions mainly through distribution of food and hygienic products	Grassroots organization	Absent
Nous Toutes Paris North	Activists from diverse political backgrounds but homogenously from the middle-class mobilising on feminist issues	Raising awareness on sexist and sexual violence and demanding effective policy responses in this regard	Streets renaming: leafleting; protest actions; postering	Local group of the national Nous Toutes movement, organized at national and local level	High level of visibility; early phases of organizational decentralisation; high salience of gender-related issues
Droit au logement	Association that fights to ensure housing rights and combats the issue of housing insecurity	Promotion of actions directed to address the issue of inadequately housed and homeless individuals, often in network with other associations and movement organisations	Help desks on housing issues; protest actions; encampments: self-requisition of vacant housing	Formal association, structured at national and local level	No remarkable pre-pandemic phase stood out as relevant.
Extinction Rebellion	Radical international movement against the ecological crisis	Nonviolent civil disobedience actions to draw attention to the severity of the ecological collapse and demand bolder and immediate policies to address it	Anti-advertisement actions; road blockades; sit-ins and occupations of public places; climate strikes; guerrilla gardening	Local group of the transnational movement Extinction Rebellion.	High level of visibility; High salience of climate change; early phases of organizational decentralisation.

Table 4. Antecedent conditions of social movement organizations in Milan: identity, organization and pre-pandemic phase

Movement organization	Collective identity	Strategy	Repertoire of action	Organization	Pre-pandemic phase
Rimake	Far left political culture, with many founders disillusioned by left parties and interested in 'another way of doing politics'. It includes also people without any prior experience in political activism.	Forming broader communities based on shared needs and material experiences. Politicise people starting from a response to their needs	The focus was direct social action but protest activists	Grassroots group	Early experimentation with mutual help practices within the project "Non sei solo/a"
Collective 20092	Political collective with a central focus on housing	Raising a critique towards current policies on housing by sheltering people in need in the collective's squatted space.	Direct social action; protest actions; pickets, organization of recreational and alternative leisure activities	Informal political collective belonging to the wider housing movement in Milan	Phase of decline and abeyance; particular low participation
Collective Zam	Social centre, defining itself around the issues of antifascism, anti-capitalism and anti-sexism	Offering alternative spaces of social and political identification, with the possibility of living the city outside the market logics	Protests; campaigns; organization of recreational and alterative leisure activities for the local community	Italian social centre	No remarkable pre-pandemic phase stood out as relevant.
Lambretta	Social centre, with participant belonging to the far left movement areas including post-autonomous area of social antagonism	Realisation in the inward space of social centre of change desired in the outside world. Acting conflict via protest-based action	Protest-based forms of actions with a high degree of confrontation	Italian social centre	Phase of decline, with internal fractures
Extinction Rebellion Milan	Radical international movement against the ecological crisis	Nonviolent civil disobedience actions to draw attention to the severity of the ecological collapse and demand bolder and immediate policies to address it	Anti-advertisement actions; road blockades; sit-ins and occupations of public places; climate strikes; guerrilla gardening	Local group of the transnational movement Extinction Rebellion.	The group had recently formed when the pandemic broke out → low material resources

CHAPTER 6

Pathways of change in Milan after Covid-19 emergency

6.1 Introduction

This chapter delves into the process of transformation of Milanese movement groups in the framework of the pandemic. In particular, it discusses the sequences of interlocking mechanisms and sub-mechanisms of each actors' pathways, and, by doing so, it illustrates the forms and extents of changes experienced by them. Section 6.2 is dedicated to the pathways of change of five social centres of the city: Collective Zam, Lambretta, Spazio 20092 and Rimake. Milan has been one of the epicentres of the pandemic in Italy. Overall, the elevated mortality rates have thrust the health crisis management of the Lombardy region into the spotlight for its flawless. In a city where collective action is traditionally strong, emergency times have represented a particularly lively phase. In particular, social centres experimented significantly with direct social action, some joining the circuit of the Voluntary Solidarity Brigades network (Lambretta, Zam and Collective 20092), while others acting in autonomy (Rimake). In light of their starting commonalities, being similar actors responding similarly to the emergency, Section 6.2 compares their trajectories of change together. These were marked by similar patterns sustaining the process, namely by similar concatenation of mechanisms. However, eventual medium-term changes differed. Their presentation together hence enables to appreciate dissimilarities in similarity. Section 6.3 tackles the trajectory of Extinction Rebellion Milan which is treated on its own for its starting differences to other cases - a newborn local group of a transnational movement. Section 6.4 concludes the chapter comparing pathways and making some considerations regarding the relevance of time and antecedent conditions in explaining change after an emergency.

6.2 Social centres across emergency times: Rimake, Collective Zam, Collective 20092 and Lambretta

The first type of organization features the social centres belonging to the Milanese social movement scene and included in this work: Rimake, Collective Zam, Collective 20092 and Lambretta. These actors' trajectories are marked by similar mechanisms, as shown in the table below. In particular, at the beginning of the pathway, they manifested major similarities. All of them have indeed known *adjustments*, *ties transformation* and *bridging* (as for the latter, with the exception of Rimake). This

pattern is highlighted in grey in the table below. Continuing along the trajectory, Lambretta, Rimake and Collective 20092 have indeed experienced the concatenation of *renovation* followed by *identity shift* (in light grey in the Table 5). However, at these later stages of transformation, some differences stand out. In Lambretta case, renovation has been preceded by boundary *activation*. Zam instead underwent *re-equilibration*, which makes its pattern sustaining the change process different from that of the other social centres. I below highlight how these dynamics played out via a mechanism by mechanism presentation. At the end of this section, Table 6 reports the main forms of post-emergency change reported by actors.

Table 5. Pathways of change by mechanisms and sub-mechanisms of the social centres in Milan

Collective actors	*Mechanisms and sub-mechanisms*					
Lambretta	**Adjustments** Negotiation; Attribution of opportunity; Networking.	**Ties transformation** Ties building; Contention capacity enhancement	**Bridging** Rooting; Cognitive broadening; Energization; Legitimization.	**Boundary activation** Negotiation.	**Renovation** Resource depletion; Attribution of opportunity.	**Identity shift** Boundary blurring
Zam	**Adjustments** Negotiation; Attribution of opportunity; Networking.	**Ties transformation** Ties building; Contention capacity enhancement.	**Bridging** Rooting; Cognitive broadening; Energization; Legitimization.	**Re-equilibration** Resource depletion; Threat attribution.		
Rimake	**Adjustments** Negotiation; Attribution of opportunity.	**Ties transformation** Ties building; Contention capacity enhancement.	**Renovation** Negotiation; Resource depletion; Attribution of opportunity.		**Identity shift** Boundary blurring	
Collective 20092	**Adjustments** Negotiation; Attribution of opportunity; Networking.	**Ties transformation** Ties building; Contention capacity enhancement	**Bridging** Rooting; Cognitive broadening; Energization; Legitimization.	**Renovation** Negotiation; Resource depletion; Attribution of opportunity. .	**Identity shift** Boundary blurring	

Adjustments

Right after the declaration of the national lockdown in Italy, in March 2020, activists started strategizing to adapt to the sudden restrictions. It was the setoff of an *Adjustment* dynamic, which

started through a *negotiation* effort. Movement groups had to decide what to do within the emergency-induced constraints but also about those constraints. In a nutshell, they grappled with strategic choices as well as with their underlying dilemmas and related trade-offs (Jasper 2004, 2006). While actors typically confront options and potential risks when strategizing, the sudden onset of a pandemic made this routine dynamic peculiar. The suspension of normal, everyday timeframe and the abrupt uncertainty about the future compelled them to reassess priority issues and strategies, as well as to put established goals in standby:

> "It was a long, challenging, and morally burdensome political elaboration. We questioned ourselves from the beginning; we, too, were frightened, with concerns and apprehensions. The uncertainty of what would happen tomorrow was present. After an initial period of typical confusion where we weren't sure what to do, we eventually said, "Okay, guys, let's calm down. We need to respond in a political and clear-headed manner because we know that if a thousand people are dying every day, the virus is unknown and aggressive, but there's also a whole political discourse to do about twenty years of dismantling local healthcare." It was a lengthy process of reflection with various steps, but we questioned ourselves from the outset. The state of emergency was declared on March 8, 2020, and the Brigade was born on March 15, 2020".
>
> (I11 – Collective Zam)

This excerpt effectively highlights another aspect of the *negotiation* dynamic. Decision about whether and how to respond were conditional upon a shared interpretation of the emergency. Negotiation, hence, included also the work of meaning construction of the unfolding events (Snow 2013), which was preliminary to any decision of action. As the quote illustrates, actors tried to re-establish a cognitive control over reality via an interpretation which put in connection the unprecedented events with prior familiar diagnoses ("there is a whole discourse to do about twenty years of dismantling of local healthcare", above quote). Negotiation worked closely with *attribution of opportunity*. Attribution of opportunity refers to actors cognitively appropriating the emergency context as favourable for them. This sense of "favourability" was understood in two main ways. First, organizations saw the occurrence of the emergency as in line with prior diagnoses and prognoses. At the level of diagnoses, the emergency did not reveal anything new. Activists were aware that "what the institutions would do in the pandemic wouldn't have included the lower strata of the population" (I2 - Lambretta) since the outset of the pandemic. Looking back, they confirmed that "this is indeed what happened" (ibidem). Regarding prognoses, they saw the emergency context as a confirmation of the pathway previously chosen. The decision to engage in direct social action, indeed, stemmed out of a pre-existing reflection on mutual aid. Rimake and Zam, in particular, saw the escalating urgency to provide for the material needs of a growing number of people as a chance to try out ideas and/or practices they had been developing for years. This was all the more true for Rimake, which had already placed DSAs at the core of its pre-pandemic political

elaborations and activities. Interviewees recalled that the idea of needs response from below was already there, but that the change in the context pushed its relevance to the forefront:

"The pandemic really gave us momentum in this regard. Unfortunately, even in the dramatic situation, it probably clarified things for us, such as being pragmatic and less focused on overthinking how to build the project in the best way possible, but rather on providing a response in the shortest time possible. This is because one of the elements that allowed us to reach so many people was certainly the speed with which we had this idea, put it together, and launched it. Without spending time trying to figure it all out […] that was the right intuition, a more instinctive approach, saying "Let's dive in and see how it goes," unlike the past where we have always been overly reflective and fearful of the risks we could take".

(I8 – Rimake)

In other words, *attribution of opportunity* was activated because the emergency timeframe required urgent and concrete action here and how, prompting actors to shift from theory to practice. An activist from Zam described the latter process in a particular clear way:

"Actually, it [the emergency] seemed too good to be true, except it was a horrible thing for the rest of the world. However, years ago, when we wrote a document about "building resilient communities", trying to create social fabric, making people know each other, etc. The pandemic was like our wedding invitation; it was the very thing we were already doing, and something had erupted that indicated our work was necessary".

(I17 – Collective Zam)

The metaphor of the "wedding invitation" vividly captures that the emergency enabled activists to materialize, through direct social action, their plans to rebuild social fabric and fostering social solidarity links. In a nutshell, it validated the legitimacy of their conflictual approach.

The second way *attribution of opportunity* worked was via the interpretation of direct social action as a mean to address personal needs and to move beyond a pre-pandemic period of decline. This was the case of Lambretta, for which DSA in emergency times was an ad-hoc choice taken on the basis of newly arisen psychological issues and long-standing internal motivations:

"I believe that the initiative to create the 'Brigata Lena Modotti' was a rare example of how personal needs and political requirements went hand in hand. Faced with individuals finding themselves in an unthinkable situation just a few weeks prior, having a reference community, knowing that there was the 'Lambretta,' was a way to be useful, to maintain a clear conscience in a difficult moment, responding to the collective emergency and individual suffering by attempting to create a sense of community based on the fact that we are all experiencing the same situation. This is one aspect; the other was the opportunity to build relationships. The brigade succeeded in placing relationships at the centre when they had to undergo radical transformations. Many people began to suffer from psychological problems. For many, the brigade was an answer, and this went hand in hand with the political need to recreate a group with new foundations".

(I4 - Lambretta)

On the one hand, engaging directly with needs from the grassroots served to combat lockdown-induced feelings of isolation. In a way, hence, it addressed a psychological need not to succumb to

individual despair amidst uncertainty. On the other hand, the materiality of needs provision was seen as strategic upon the perspective of addressing group conflicts, internal divisions and periods of decline. *Adjustments* via grassroots needs provision was facilitated by a *networking* dynamic as well. Except for Rimake, which maintained its independence, all other actors joined the Voluntary Emergency Brigades (VEB). This involved networking with the NGO Emergency, which offered financial and logistical support to the VEB, and with the city government, which coordinated the initiative. Activists had mixed feelings about this decision. On one hand, they acknowledged the advantages of forming such strategic partnerships, recognizing that they could provide the practical resources needed to reach a wider audience during a critical moment:

"Emergency is a highly respected organization, they have different mechanisms [functioning modalities] than ours, but the help that Emergency brought was crucial. They have millions of euros, infrastructure, trucks, the ability to secure million-dollar contracts with food distribution chains. What do you do, go to Esselunga and ask for a contract as a Zam collective? So we said: ok, we collaborate with Emergency, but let's remember that we come from self-managed realities. The Brigate Volontarie di Emergenza (BVE) are not self-managed entities; they are acting during the pandemic, but we have things to say. We are not Emergency; we are just collaborating with Emergency. We are not making charity, we are making mutualism".

(I11- ZAM)

In emergency situations, conditions of declining resources and escalating needs make pragmatic concerns all the more dominant. In the context of the lockdown, concerns included maximizing action effectiveness via immediate material responses as well as being able to operate in the streets freely – i.e., without police controls. These necessities drove actors to use the NGO and city government as strategic shelters for their efforts. On the other hand, the phrase "we are not Emergency; we are just collaborating with Emergency" well captures social centres' willingness to distinguish themselves from the traditional third-sector, top-down approach to help of organizations like Emergency, to which they opposed the notion of mutual help. Hence, these 'new unlikely alliances' (Smith 2020:3), driven more by necessity than by choice, became essential in challenging times to address urgent needs.

Ties transformation

The second mechanism found in the change trajectories of social centres is *ties transformation*. It took place first and foremost via a *ties building* dynamic. The immediate consequence of launching mutual aid initiatives was indeed the connection between activists and two communities of people: beneficiaries and volunteers. With regard to the former, giving out food packages became a way to enlarge the community networks to a neighbourhood-based segment of the population that "in normal times would have been very hard to engage with" (I13 - Zam). By saying this, activists refer to marginalized and resource-poor individuals, who, in normal circumstances, would have been

very difficult to intercept and aggregate. The emergency-intensified grievances and the creation of the Brigade in reaction served, hence, as catalysts for bridging this gap. As for the latter, the temporality of emergency fostered biographical availability, creating an unprecedented potential for activation. I refer to this dynamic by the environmental sub-mechanism *contention capacity enhancement*. The temporality of emergency indeed restructured completely people's schedules. It liberated their time by suspending routines and created the conditions for activation. This is recalled by a Rimake activist who joined during the lockdown:

"I found myself at home, jobless, with dysfunctional online classes, and a sense of alienation. When the entire world was locked down, both my partner and I immediately felt the need to do something. […] So, in reality, I was driven from the very beginning by a selfish need to leave the house, a need to do something. It's those things you always ask yourself: What would I have done in this historic event? Would I have participated or not? I immediately thought that those who are healthy are less frightened can support those with real and effective problems. I had spent a year with Extinction Rebellion, but it was still in formation. We had a year of meetings, which were the opposite of getting active and doing things. I needed a structure that was already geared towards action and not just reflections on how to do things [which drove me to choose Rimake]."

(I10- Rimake)

Suddenly, people had nothing else to do. The disruption of everyday life drove people's involvement in connection with an abrupt moral urgency 'to do something', as the quote reports. Indeed, the need to break free from the confines of home was closely linked with the emergency-bounded sense of guilt for not actively participating in unfolding events. Furthermore, the first few weeks of the pandemic were dominated by a sense of fear, impotence and a lack of control over the situation: taking action was a way out from these emotions.

Additionally, it is interesting to note *who* got involved and *in what*. As regards the first point, most volunteers were either new to activism or sympathizers, meaning they had wanted to get involved politically for a while but had never really done so until that moment. For this latter group, as recounted by one of them who took part in Lambretta's Brigade: "the pandemic served as the ultimate catalyst for action" (I3 - Lambretta). As for *what they got involved in*, the desire not to stand by idly aligned with the intrinsic characteristics of direct social action. Providing practical help, on one hand, fulfilled the moral imperative to contribute to the fight against the virus. On the other, direct social action implied hands-on in the materiality of the concrete making – e.g. collecting donations, delivering groceries and distributing essential products packages. Hence, they created the conditions for developing social relations and for individuals to avoid succumbing individually to a sense of powerlessness in the face of the emergency. As a consequence, it is no surprise to find *ties transformation* in the trajectories of all the social centres opting for DSA. Increases in participation during the lockdown varied among different cases. For example, there

was a peak of 400 newly mobilized people for Lambretta, while the growth was more modest for Collective Zam.

Bridging

The adoption of direct social action led actors to progressively experience a dynamic of *Bridging*. Bridging refers to the expansion of the boundaries of the social environment in which actions unfolds. Engaging in needs provision allowed them to broaden their reach and to overcome the barrier between social centres and the surrounding environment. They indeed unlocked the perimeter of their action, opening themselves to the neighbourhood community and increasing their rootedness at local level. This mechanism was activated in the trajectories of all actors except Rimake. This is because Rimake had breached the traditional access barriers of social centres long before the pandemic. Having initiated the construction of a solidarity work at neighbourhood level some years prior, it had already widened its network of relationships beyond the perimeter of a traditional political collective. Bridging did not activate, hence, since what happened for this actor was in continuity with an established path.

Bridging started out via a *rooting* dynamic, namely via the revitalization of the territorial dimension of collective action and the development of bonds of solidarity with the local community. An activist from Collective 20092 once told me that direct social action had allowed them to "return to being present in the territory" (I7- Lambretta)ly an integral part of ito and consequently an integral part of it. The opening of action to larger segments of society at local level spurred *cognitive broadening*. By interacting with beneficiaries, actors gathered information about neighbourhood households' situations, which fostered the development of a deeper knowledge of the environment in which they were placed:

"we managed to reach a significantly larger number of families in the area. This meant, from a study perspective, understanding who the people were, collecting data, highlighting situations of precariousness, and even simply directing people to the right places."

(I18- Collective 20092)

The blurring of boundaries between activist milieus and other communities fostered actors' thorough understanding of the local environment. In particular, activists realised that the pandemic had only worsened pre-existing hardships. Furthermore, they acknowledged that beneficiaries' strains were more complex and multi-layered than those initially addressed on the basis of the understanding of the situation as a context of health emergency. They quickly recognised that they were facing a beyond emergency situation. In this sense, direct social action allowed actors to

become “an extra pair of eyes on situations that were increasingly escaping official assessments” (I19- Collective 20092). Furthermore, bridging occurred through the consolidation of a positive public image of the collectives:

“Externally, we received significantly positive feedback because people perceive us as more reliable. The level of trust we had established earlier has further solidified; even before [the pandemic], people considered us a reference for the neighbourhood, but witnessing how we assisted in the material aspects of people's lives has strengthened that perception. This extends beyond mere reliability; it has garnered greater trust from individuals. Those who used to pass by with just a nod now stop, enter, and engage in conversations with us for more than five minutes. This acknowledgment has been formalized through our activation during the COVID-19 period”.

(I11-Collective Zam)

Direct social actions in emergency times prompted positive feedbacks from the outside, fuelling social *legitimization*. Collective actors viewed the increase in trust by a wider public as a positive outcome inasmuch as it allowed them to challenge the image of self-manages spaces as islands within the city. Amidst the emergency, they progressively established within the social environment of the neighbourhood, becoming points of reference for the local community. This fuelled and was fuelled, in a loop-like generative pattern, by an *energization* dynamic. Activists extensively described the wider reach on the territory enabled by the Brigade as a “a boost of energy” (I15 – Collective 20092) and as a source of internal morale uplift. This was especially the case for those actors which had undergone a phase of within group demoralization or internal frictions right before the pandemic – most notably, Zam, Lambretta and Collective 20092. Interviewees overwhelmingly stressed feelings of joy, enjoyment and moral energy which were forged in the making, out of a shared effort in helping those in need. It is crucial to reiterate that this burst of energy was not an automatic response triggered by the emergency *per se*. Instead, it was ignited by the materiality and concreteness associated with the decision to engage in direct social actions amid such an emergency. Energization came also from the prospects that an enlarged societal grip could lead to broadening the perimeter of their struggles to a wider constituency. In essence, actors viewed their engagement with a more diverse audience as an unprecedented opportunity for broader politicization and collective awakening. The feeling of potential inherent in the emergency timeframe is well summarized by a Zam’s longstanding activist:

“People were more receptive to what we were saying. This was because we coupled this pure level of assistance with a discourse of social and political critique. People, in addition to receiving the material help they needed, were more open to our discussions. They would stop more often to talk to us, try to understand what we were saying, and we became more integrated into the daily lives and homes of the people”.

(I1- ZAM)

There was likely a distinctive Milanese peculiarity in this feeling of transformative potential. This owed to an understanding of the Brigades not as single groups choice, but as a nascent city-wide agent. Beyond being short-term emergency responses, the Brigades were indeed emerging as a new organization capable of bringing together different collective groups in the territory around common practices[55]. Moreover, hopes for a new bottom-up resistance to emerge were embedded in the collective memory (Zamponi 2022) of city movements' past successes and failures. As conveyed by an activist from Zam: "in my mind, there's a distinction: pre-2015, 2015, post-2015. I felt that strength, unity and potential again during the most dramatic period of the pandemic" (I13-ZAM). Activists drew parallels between the sense of potential they felt before the No Expo protests in 2015 - when a united progressive front rallied against the impacts of the Universal Exposition in the city - and the potential for an alternative future sensed during Covid-19 emergency. One activist from Zam expressed this sentiment eloquently: "there were more ideas [during Covid], and therefore, probably a chance to build something beyond simply providing aid. The conditions were there to believe that something new was being created" (I12- Zam). More than expectations of a supposedly more progressive post-Covid world, it was the prospect of agency transformation looming on the horizon that fuelled energization. In other words, it wasn't the Covid-19 emergency itself, with its structural characteristics, that inspired hopes for a better future, but rather the grassroots Milanese response that was emerging to counteract it. Expectations were placed on a new bottom-up resistance to emerge, a trust and hope grounded in the emergency-specific blurring boundaries between social centres and the surrounding communities:

"Many people were already familiar with the project because it had existed for many years but it was more connected to the world of social spaces with some individuals but a small portion truly approaching it for their own social needs. Instead the pandemic created a role with certain smaller sectors that engaged with Rimake because they had a need and, therefore required answers".

(I5 - Rimake)

The trust and solidarity links forged during direct social actions in emergency times represented the base on which the grassroots mobilisation gathered momentum.

Renovation

In the transition towards a time of normality, actors have known a *renovation* dynamic. Transformations in collective action contingent to emergency times stabilized and continued to evolve beyond the lockdown itself. By *renovation*, I henceforth indicate that medium-term transformations were not just continuities of how activists organized and struggled during intense times. Rather, SMOs were further transformed after that phase. This mechanism was found in the

[55] Within a few weeks of starting, the Brigades had already set up coordination at the metropolitan level.

case of Lambretta, Rimake and Collective 20092. Renovation unfolded via the interweaving of *negotiation*, *resource depletion* and *attribution of opportunity*. Time passed by, indeed, and as the lockdown phase came to an end, the pandemic situation, albeit equally dramatic, became more familiar. Actors hence grappled with the strategic dilemmas arising from the changing context. What did it mean to be effective in the aftermath of an emergency? Did effectiveness hold the same meaning as it did during the emergency? Evaluating the outcomes of adjustments made during the initial phase of the pandemic, organizations had to make difficult decisions. It was the setoff of a *negotiation* dynamic. Actors weighed the trade-offs, considering whether to maintain those adjustments, what to reproduce and what to modify in a post-emergency scenario. *Negotiation* regarded two main aspects. The first focus were the pathways of involvement of the volunteers who had been recruited in the midst of the emergency. Activists reflected on the creation of channels for encouraging the transition between ephemeral volunteer activation in times of emergency to more stable commitment in the medium-run. This particular aspect caused significant internal divisions within Lambretta. While indeed Rimake and Collective 20092 decided to continue direct social action also for the social capital it generated, providing a space for interaction between organizations and individuals external to the group, Lambretta experienced a more controversial negotiation regarding this point. In particular, cleavages arose on how to balance the contentious dimension of its identity as a traditional political collective with an increasingly bridged social environment. These tensions explain why *negotiation*, in Lambretta case, has been found to feature not renovation but a *boundary activation* dynamic, explored in the next paragraph.

Second, issues arose on how to rearrange DSA in order to move beyond an emergency-driven approach to needs provision and to deal with declining resources overtime. Amidst the lockdown, the urgency to deliver immediate, concrete responses, along with the moral energy of solidarity work, had resulted in a rhythm of intervention that hindered critical reflection over action. With the post-emergency, however, concerns about prefiguration became central. Interview data highlight the need to shift away from a third-sector-oriented approach to assistance in order to eschew the risk of State substitution[56]:

"These [emergency-DSA] were often mechanisms of one-sided solidarity, but especially as the emergency phase subsided, we tried from the very beginning not to freeze this type of relationship into a dynamic strictly between volunteers and beneficiaries".

(I6 -Rimake)

Thus, according to activists, the imperative in the post-emergency was to organize DSA in order to foster the political activation of beneficiaries on their needs. The understanding that "ours is not a

[56] Actors wanted to avoid becoming depoliticized service providers in the long-run.

humanitarian but a political approach to emergencies" whereby "the meaning of our action is not exhausted in the action itself" (I3-Lambretta) has been found cross-cuttingly across actors. Moreover, as the normalcy returned, collective actors had less resources to cover the rising costs of direct social action over the medium-run. *Resource depletion* was making its way to influence actors' pathways of change, unfolding into two main forms. On the one hand, the vast majority of volunteers who joined during the heated first phase of the pandemic withdrew. Their commitment was strongly influenced by the suspension of normal life caused by the emergency, and, as such, bounded within the limits of that temporality[57]. On the other hand, feelings of exhaustion, both in terms of time and energy, started to overshadow the initial moral excitement of the emergency. This sense of tiredness was evident in interviews with activists who sustained action after Spring 2020, as in the case of Rimake:

"Throughout 2021, a year and a half later [than March 2020], we consistently tried to sustain these activities. However, after a period of uninterrupted and accelerated activity, we found ourselves with a significant burden of fatigue and hardship. We all arrived extremely exhausted from the pandemic, having gone through a lot, including resuming our normal private lives, and continued to do many things we hadn't done before in a world that kept opening and closing. At this juncture, a political decision was made: "We've built a role around this thing," and it's a shame to let it go due to reduced availability and fewer people involved" .

(I4 – Rimake)

This excerpt effectively illustrates the interconnections between *resource depletion* and *attribution of opportunity*. In hindsight, activists recognised that the end of the emergency was accompanied by a "burden of fatigue and hardship". Moreover, interestingly, the change in timeframe influenced not only the availability of volunteers but also that of activists. They too, indeed, resumed their "normal private lives" with the consequence of having less time to sustain the fast pace of organizing of the intense lockdown period. However, *resource depletion* had a lesser gravity in the post-emergency trajectories of Rimake and of other organizations. It was indeed counteracted by the activation of *attribution of opportunity*, which drove actors' decision to maintain the Brigade – even in a rearranged form - in the medium-run. In the case of Rimake, as the above quote illustrates, opportunities were seen in the perspective to materialise the pre-pandemic intuition of building "a role around these things", where "these things" was the organization of bottom-up collective responses to social needs. A similar dynamic occurred in the case of Collective 20092. During negotiations over the continuation of Brigade Orso, in autumn 2022, activists reported that

[57] It should be specified that participation drop exerted a different influence on actors' trajectories of change according to how conspicuous the surge in participation had been in the first place. In Rimake case, after the boom during the lockdown, there was a steep decrease in participation over years, explained also by organizational reasons – e.g. emergency-bounded online organization had favoured more participation. On the contrary, it was less significant over the trajectories of Collective 20092 and Lambretta,

increased demands for support from families in distress had led to a depletion of their internal energies and time. However, the group decided to address these issues by restructuring the organization of DSA:

"Even when we reasoned on how to change the Brigade, we kept a starting point: the Brigade must remain because besides being important for the territory, it has an internal value because it allows us to meet on Saturday morning, to have lunch together, it keeps us united and cohesive. We chose to invest in it for the internal effects it had on the Collective. Moreover, the package delivery could be a way to establish connections in the city with all those people we believed should have a stronger voice. So in order to maintain it, we thought to reduce the support to 20 families every two weeks and give it a slightly more streamlined form, without the claim of involving everyone who was initially involved. Moreover, by reducing the number of followed families we could offer a better relationship […], we could follow them in a more constant and long term way […] by offering other instruments above the food package in order to make this relationship more solid and useful […]'.

(I9 - Collective 20092)

The somewhat physiological de-energization was addressed by reducing the number of assisted families and by providing them with a more targeted form of support. Collective action produced social capital, revitalizing the group after a phase of pre-pandemic wane. For Collective 20092, this represented a positive outcome to leverage in the post-emergency period. In particular, the Brigade had enabled the strengthening of ties at internal level – "it compacted the group" – and served as a strategic gateway to low-income sectors of society which "should have a stronger voice".

The most significant example of DSA reorganization, however, has been reported by Lambretta with the formalization of the Brigade into the association 'Mutuo Soccorso Milano':

"The Brigade had grown so large, with almost 300 volunteers, that it required a 24/7 commitment. It can work during a lockdown for one, two, or three months, but not indefinitely. Mutuo Soccorso was established as a tool to access funding, to be able to compensate individuals, and to support political work that deserves recognition".

(I4 - Lambretta)

Mutuo Soccorso Milan was created for a double reasons. First, it was a way to adapt the organization model of the Brigade to a grown constituency. Second, it was seen as a strategic step to "access funding […] and support political work that deserves recognition". Creating an association allowed the Brigade to be recognizable interlocutor for institutions in a post-emergency context. Lambretta strategically envisioned it as the 'institutionally friendly guise' to strengthen the capital of legitimation acquired during the emergency. This latter aspect illustrates another important nuance of *attribution of opportunity* in the context of renovation. Direct social action was to be maintained for the legitimation it provided. For example, Lambretta organized several demonstrations in front of the Municipality to denounce the precarious living conditions of homeless people and to demand action in this regard. Regardless of the poor outcomes obtained, some members of the collective were able to hold discussion tables with institutional

representatives, which shows that DSA's concreteness provided legitimacy. As emphasized by a Lambretta's longstanding activist, the Brigade "is something that earns you approval even from a non-leftist audience. You break free from the stereotype of the social centre because you are doing something that deserves recognition" (I4 - Lambretta). It hence viewed an opportunity in carrying on the activity of the Brigade as it endowed them with a capital of legitimacy which could also be spent to access decision-making[58]. The knowledge produced from below (Cox and Fominaya 2009) by connecting with beneficiaries (what, above, I have referred to as *cognitive broadening,* or, alternatively, the use of the Brigade as a study tool of the territory) had indeed the direct consequence of making actors feel "entitled to say something on the territory" (I19 – Collective 20092). It was indeed leveraged as an informative basis to organize protest actions, raise demands to the city council and to increase public awareness on different subjects. For example, the information collected about the recipients of the food parcels allowed to shed light on precarious livelihoods and were used by Collective 20092 as supporting evidence in its political pamphlets.

Based on the above considerations, renovation occurred in two primary ways in the medium-term: by restructuring direct social action and by expanding the range of services offered. As anticipated above, there was a common effort to integrate it into a broader political strategy, boosting prefiguration. This involved fuelling a more horizontal relationship between beneficiaries and activists with the perspective of creating wider communities based on shared material needs. From a strategic standpoint, it was assumed that these communities would undergo shared processes of politicization (Zamponi 2023). Tactics to achieve this goal were manifold. Rimake strengthened the mutual-aid dimension of service provision. A paramount example of this was the transformation of the childcare services that it had organized during the lockdown months. As soon as the restrictions were eased in the summer of 2020, Rimake evolved it into a summer camp managed by mutualistic principles. Beneficiary parents were encouraged to collectively contribute to its functioning by taking turns in childcare duties or cleaning the spaces used. Hence, services that were initially established to address an emergency gradually became more stable and developed over time in response to increasingly intercepted needs and available resources. Another case illustrating the effort to think DSA as a permanent action, Collective 20092 activists decided to stop the home delivery of food packages in the post-emergency. DSA rearrangement entailed beneficiaries picking them up directly at Brigade's premises under the intuition that, in this way, it would have been easier to explain them what Collective 20092 was, the reasons for squatting and, overall, to make explicit that behind the Brigade there was a precise political struggle. As far as DSA expansion is

[58] There was also a moral connotation of direct social action, associated with practices perceived as less confrontational compared to typical social centres' repertoires, which shaped more accepting attitudes from the institutions.

concerned, services focus shifted from an initial emphasis on food provision to a wide array of social and economic needs. Specifically, *cognitive broadening* on the existence of extra-food needs inspired in the post-emergency the snowball pluralisation of the typologies of support offered, as stated by one Collective 20092 activist:

"We tried to structure activities that addressed what we believed were the most pressing needs identified through our interactions with the households we have been assisting as a Brigade in recent years".

(I19- Collective 200092)

In a nutshell, the Brigade was reformulated from a patch to a food emergency to a mean to map out territorial needs. As a consequence, Collective 20092 created further activities, like an after-school for children, a social desk on housing and monthly open days for people to come and visit the facility and get to know the space. These latter appointments typically featured a recreational moment and a presentation of the social analyses produced by the collective. They were conceived as occasions to make the space a hub for aggregation and political socialization, building a sense of collective belonging. Interestingly, it must be noted that in the case of Rimake, the pluralisation of services expanded quickly already during the emergency itself – began with grocery delivery and quickly expanded to include a union help-desk service and childcare support. This was the case because the actor could draw on an already established awareness on needs. Concern for childcare, for example, emerged from the pre-pandemic experience as "feminist reflection on social reproduction led us to say that it was a fundamental urgency on par with eating" (I8 - Rimake). Pre-emergency reasoning and experiences with the local community hence made Rimake's antennas already tuned in to the needs that would likely arise with the outbreak of the pandemic.

The relationships that mattered for driving repertoire renovation were not only those with beneficiaries but also the ones with and among volunteers engaged on the wake of the temporality of emergency. The enlargement of their social environments to broadened publics of participants allowed actors to open their doors to people with a different mind-set than that – quoting one of the interviewees - of the 'traditional social centre militant' (I7- Collective 20092), which brought about a circulation of new ideas and inputs, ultimately leading to an enrichment of the forms of action. The temporality of the post-emergency hence stabilised and further solidified some of the provisional emergency-bounded connections, which not only provided greater availability of people ready to engage, to get hands-on in the making, but also opened new pathways of 'thinkable' forms of action – i.e., the ideas of an after-school for children and an Italian school for migrants were proposed by an activist which originally entered Collective 20092 case via the Brigade. As a result, in both Lambretta and Collective 20092 cases, the process of post-emergency change signalled a

shift toward towards less contentious tactics compared to their pre-pandemic paths. This changed their interaction with the surrounding environment, with institutions and ultimately influenced the remaking of their identity, as I will detail below with the mechanism identity shift.

Boundary activation (Lambretta)

Before taking up renovation, Lambretta underwent *boundary activation*. The exit out of emergency times was experienced, as one activist very evocatively told me, as a "growth crisis" (I4 - Lambretta). Negotiation was marked by divisions on strategizing in the aftermath of the emergency:

> "Some of us were not convinced of the Brigade because people were not militants. In the sense that someone came here to lend a hand, someone comes here not to get involved in organizing the social centre assembly or creating slogans. They saw them more as volunteers than activists. I have always thought that integration work should be done. Things are not automatic, it's not that you enter a social centre and have to be an activist. Everyone expresses political engagement in their own way".
>
> (I4 - Lambretta)

Reflections on the impact of direct social action pushed actors to consider who they wanted to be and what they wanted to do in the aftermath of the emergency. This naturally raised questions about their previous boundaries, such as who they were and what they did before the pandemic. In other words, negotiation - also when more consensual than in this specific case - consistently involved a reassessment of the actors' own previous trajectories. The transition between the two temporalities looked like a Gramscian interregnum between past and future, where "the old is dying and the new cannot be born". In such a precarious terrain, tensions were likely to arise. Disputes over the trajectory of "growth" led to cleavages among longstanding members of Lambretta regarding the stance toward pre-pandemic boundaries. One faction of the collective showed a strong resistance to change, advocating for a return to Lambretta's perimeter as it was before the pandemic. This group viewed the Brigade and its outcomes, in terms of enlarged participation and greater openness to the neighbourhood, as emergency-bounded parentheses, useless in non-emergency times. This perception of "uselessness" stemmed from a specific interpretation of the actor as it was before the pandemic, hence a traditional self-managed social centre, focused on protest activities and claim-making actions by politicized militants. In other words, this strategic line sought to restore Lambretta to its pre-pandemic identity. Another line, instead, claimed for an exit from the emergency exceptionality by integrating the emergency-induced changes as enduring aspects of the actor. Specifically, they saw direct social action and its outcomes as an opportunity to revive the group after a period of pre-pandemic abeyance. Eventually, this strategic line prevailed and, as a

consequence, a part of the group withdrew the organization. These dynamics eventually allowed Lambretta to embark on *renovation*.

Re-equilibration (Collective Zam)

In contrast to other cases, in Zam case, *resource depletion* combined with *threat attribution*. Their combination eventually hindered the sedimentation of emergency-related adjustments in the medium-run, activating *re-equilibration*, namely the return to pre-pandemic conditions. the various patterns of organizing and acting during the intense period of contention were exceptional: once that phase was over, activists went back to pre-pandemic modes of normal organizing. It is noteworthy, however, that re-equilibration occurred relatively late in the actor's trajectory. Collective Zam deliberately maintained the Brigade as a mode of action until it perceived it as strategically opportune, specifically until early 2022, when the decision was made to disband it. First, it witnessed the operation of *resource depletion*. The shift to the post-emergency led to a reduced availability by activists, which meant that as time went on, the logistical organization of the activity relied on the effort of a few. However, the main driver of resource depletion was a sense of increasing moral fatigue and overall de-energization. The perceived impetus for a wave of public outrage to outburst, actively contributed to by direct social action serving as a channel to a wider audience, faded away in the post-emergency period, turning out to be indeed very ephemeral and contingent on the emergency circumstances:

"The impetus for change, the momentum it had at the beginning, had dissipated. The world around us had shifted, somewhat independent of our efforts. Life's rhythms had returned, and a new normalcy was taking root. Due to a variety of both contextual and contingent factors, we realized that the experience had run its course. The Brigade was transforming into something mechanical and overly paternalistic. It confronted us with the difficulties inherent in discourse, relationships, and approaching individuals unaccustomed to activist politics. So we ended up being less interested in it. It was a beautiful and intriguing journey, but it had come to an end."

(I11 –Zam)

"Everything has change from the perspective of political discourse, logistical organization, composition of members, and the material of the brigade. Between mid-March 2020, when the Brigade was born, and early 2022, when it was dismissed, the world had changed. What was true in February 2020 was not the same in February 2022. The context around us has fundamentally changed in terms of an even greater disintegration and atomization of individuals. There has been an increase in detachment, loneliness, and atomization and the gap between social classes has widened".

(I16 –Zam)

The quotes strongly emphasize the demoralisation stemming from the disappointed prospects of expected change. Instead, there was a realization that circumstances may have deteriorated further.

Interestingly, during interviews, Zam's activists linked this frustration and disillusion with the handling of the pandemic in Lombardy. The severity of the health crisis in the region exacerbated their incredulity in front of the absence of societal change. One activist told me that initially she "pictured people in the streets, breaking everything" (I13- Zam), expecting the development of a social mobilization sparked by the glaring "injustices and failures" by the region government (I13 - Zam). However, over time, she reluctantly came to accept, with resignation, that a "collective denial" (ibidem) of the events had occurred in the medium term. As a results of this frustration, *threat attribution* was activated. Zam ultimately ceased to consider the DSA strategically relevant for attaining his goals. First, the lack of expected recognition from institutions resulted in de-legitimation. Second, the emergency-bounded momentum which opened opportunities for thinking that via 'food parcels delivery' people could be politicised had shrunk. The progressive closure of opportunities with the advance of normalcy was evident in June 2020 and 2021, when the Brigades in Milan contributed to organising protest events against the regional government regarding the management of the pandemic:

"I remember being quite disappointed. Only 2,000 people in the square after a year of the pandemic, 16,000 deaths, and even a techno music event would attract 5,000 people. It wasn't pleasant. [The year after] we were ten times less, perhaps, with a maximum of 100 people" .

(I17 –Zam)

The degree of involvement in the organization of the demonstration decreased significantly from a year to the other and reflected the weakness of the prospects for a broad public outrage to explode – the political activation of both volunteers and beneficiaries of direct social action was very low. The Brigade had transformed in mere assistentialism and, hence, it was dismissed.

Re-equilibration did not equal lack of change. Indeed, the Collective wanted to sediment its political commitment to health issues. Recognised that the Brigade was no longer strategic to serve this purpose, Zam expanded its repertoire by opening a popular health-desk. This desk provide assistance on health-related concerns and redirected people to the appropriate social services structures. The health desk was established in collaboration with another local collective called *GTA-Gratosoglio Autogestita*, with whom the actor had networked for mounting the Southern Milan Brigade. The stabilisation of the network, the broadening of the focus to include health issues, and the introduction of a new form direct social action were the enduring impacts of the pandemic period in Zam's medium-term change trajectory.

Identity shift

The last mechanism in the pathway of change of Lambretta, Rimake and Collective 20092 was identity shift. Its final position in the sequence of mechanisms sustaining the process of change of the above-mentioned actors suggests that new collective identities were in themselves a cultural consequence of movement action during and after the health emergency (Polletta and Jasper 2001). In particular, this mechanism unfolded in the three cases along a *boundary blurring* dynamic. Yet, it led to different outcomes, in term of forms and extents of identity change, according to the actor's pre-pandemic trajectory.

In the case of Rimake, the change in identity was minimal. Rather than a breaking from prior identity boundaries, its trajectory of transformation placed the actor in continuity with its pre-pandemic path. In fact, the decision to invest in the project *Non sei solo/non sei sola* in the medium-run signalled this as the main identity hallmark of the actor. In other words, the pandemic marked definitely the creation of the social role that Rimake had already started having, yet at an embryonic stage, prior to the emergency. Its identity resulted hence blurred, as composed by Rimake and *Non sei solo/Non sei sola.*

Prior identity boundaries *blurred* also for Lambretta and Collective 20092. These actors commonly experienced a transition from volunteer activation during the emergency to stable commitment in the long-run. This persistence is not to be taken for granted. The overall tendency, as time passed by, was indeed that of a demobilisation of the volunteers who were recruited in the midst of the emergency. However, in both cases, the shift to more stable forms of involvement beyond the emergency period has been described as a spontaneous and natural process. For Collective 20092, it was facilitated by the relationship between the Brigade's activity and the physical and symbolic space occupied by the collective. The Brigade's distributions indeed took place within the collective's premises, a housing squat that sheltered homeless migrant families since 2015. Thus, the physical access to the occupied building accelerated the development of a sense of belonging and stronger identification with the broader political collective. This overlap enabled a contamination effect between the social activity of the Brigade and the housing struggle of the Collective. This mirrored also at organizational level through the fusion of the two assemblies - the Brigade's and the political collective:

"After the Brigade's work started, gatherings were primarily focused on the Brigade, followed by a separate assembly of the political collective. Over time, these two aspects have somewhat merged. In Brigade meetings, there is often a discussion about the space, indicating a frequent overlap between the two moments and phases. Topics range from relationships with residents to internal issues among residents up to broader political matters concerning the city [of Cinisello]."

(I7- Collective 20092)

While the focus on needs provision during the emergency necessitated the establishment of a dedicated assembly for the Brigade, as the emergency passed by, the slowing pace of response to needs made organizationally more efficient to have hold one overall assembly. With a natural osmosis, members of the Brigades' assembly integrated in the political assembly of the Collective. When asked about who they are today (late 2022) and how they identify after the pandemic, a long-standing member told me that Collective 20092 became Collective 20092 *and* Brigade Orso, specifying that "they are ways of doing the same things" (I20- Collective 20092). This quote is particularly insightful as it attests to the reshaping of identities by means of practices. The understanding of the Brigade and the Collective as "two ways of doing the same things" perfectly captures the link between the shift in strategy and the ensuing shift in identity. Once decided to maintain the Brigade, with everything it implied in terms of enlarged participation and presence in the territory, the Collective recognised that it was not possible to subsume it into prior identity boundaries. It instead interpreted as an opportunity the possibility of blurring them. As a consequence, its identity hybridized; it did not overlap anymore with the one before the pandemic nor with the one with which the collective operated during the Covid emergency - the Brigade –but it coincided with a new, that combined elements from both.

The same dynamic applied in the case of Lambretta. Compared to other cases, Lambretta reported the highest increases in participation during and after the emergency. Hence, it navigated the delicate balance between reach and identity. Eventually, it decided to recognize varying degrees and forms of participation, some entailing a more intentional political engagement, while others remaining at the level of sporadic volunteerism:

> "Now, in the post-pandemic phase, we are trying to recover the political collective, we are starting not to be only "those who deliver food packages" but to make more actions and discourses at political level, while beforehand [during the emergency] everything was more centred on the practice. Many people indeed joined for volunteering, then some of them remained and understood where they were, others remained but kept taking it as volunteering […] Everyone has a different spirit in how they approach activism. I believe that a social space like ours, instead of dictating how politics should be done, should provide tools for everyone to express their desire to change the world, even if that approach is not their own".
>
> (I17 - Lambretta)

Out of the emergency, Lambretta concerns shifted away from the practicalities of DSA with the aim of embedding it in a broader political discourse in accordance to "who it was". Interestingly enough, however, the very idea of "who it was" changed over the course of the pandemic. The very decision to blend traditional political claim-making with practice-based actions altered the identity in the name of which participants interacted both among themselves and with the environment

around them. Identity boundaries became more flexible, spanning from the profile of the social centre militant to more direct social action-centred and not forcefully political forms of engagement. The blurring of identities paved the way for layered identities. Participants could engage to the extent they desired and signify their commitment in their own ways, without the need to fit pre-existing ideological and practice boundaries. To this regard, it is remarkable that talking about the reasons behind the decision to continue the Brigade after the end of emergency, an activist from Lambretta told me that "we are very close friends, and that's what keeps this place going" (I11 - Lambretta). Hence, some individuals continued solely with the Brigade – become 'Mutuo Soccorso Milano' - and regarded it as volunteering, while others transitioned to also participate in the political assembly of Lambretta.

Table 6. Post-emergency changes of social centres in Milan

	Changes at symbolic level	*Changes at organizational level*		
Collective actor	**Collective identity**	**Strategy**	**Repertoire of action**	**Organization**
Rimake	Rimake + *Non sei solo/a*	DSA-based strategy passed from the theoretical to the practical level.	Compared to the pre-pandemic, widening of the set of DSA practices.	Continuity
Collective Zam	Continuity	Continuity	Minimum variation consisting in the opening of an health desk (DSA)	Continuity
Lambretta	Blurring of the identity boundaries: Lambretta + Mutuo Soccorso Milano	Moderation, with a greater focus on latent and not overtly confrontational forms of action.	Sedimentation of direct social action and its pluralisation in a set of different practices	Combination of the informal, loosely organized political collective with the newly established formal association 'Mutuo Soccorso Milano'
Collective 20092	Blurring of the identity boundaries: Collective 20092 + Brigade Orso	Protest-based forms of action + interception and response to neighbourhood needs via direct social action.	Sedimentation of direct social action and its pluralisation in a set of different practices	Overlap between the informal grassroots political collective and the Brigade.

6.3 Extinction Rebellion Milan

The trajectory of Extinction Rebellion Milan was marked by the occurrence of *adjustments* and *re-equilibration* (Table 7). Evidence of its cross-dimension continuity overtime is provided in Table 8 at the end of the Section.

Table 7. Trajectory of change of XR Milan by mechanisms and sub-mechanisms

Collective actor	*Mechanisms and sub-mechanisms*	
XR Milan	**Adjustments** Negotiation Networking	**Re-equilibration** Threat attribution

Adjustments unfolded over a longer period of time in XR Milan than in all other cases. XR Milan was indeed still at an early stage of creation when the pandemic suddenly broke out, which led activists to experience a long negotiation over what to do:

" It was a period of a bit of disorientation, a bit of confusion, because, naturally, the group... well, it was forming, so, in a way, this situation cut our legs out from under us. Initially, we focused on simply staying in touch, even if it was just to... share a bit of our feelings, the emotions we were experiencing during that time, you know, in lockdown, and... then, anyway, we also held meetings to try to figure out how we could, anyway, continue our struggle, so to speak, trying to adapt, anyway, to the situation that involved many movement restrictions".

(I21 - XR Milan)

While initial feelings of disorientation and confusion were inherent to the temporality of the emergency, these unscored a heightened necessity of time for reflection for still unstructured groups, like XR. Decision about what to do in the emergency closely intertwined with who XR was *before* the emergency. In particular, the choice to invest in social media activism aligned with the strategic priority of constructing and sharing a frame of Covid-19 pandemic as connected with the climate crisis. Forced to temporarily suspend civil disobedience action, the focus shifted towards the online realm as a strategic space where to engage in a sense-making activity of the ongoing emergency. This decision, however, was taken not amidst the first lockdown, but when Italy was entering a second, relatively softer set of restrictions:

"There [when the second lockdown came], we had made a more thorough reasoning, tried to lay out our actions to rewrite a narrative that took into account, precisely, the pandemic and the fact that it was an effect of the capitalist system and its distortions, in short".

(I21–Rimake)

The shift in temporality allowed XR to react more promptly to the post-emergency. Emotions of fear, despair and lack of control which had the primacy and needed to be taken care of during the lockdown phase gave way in the post-emergency to a greater focus over strategy. The pandemic situation had become indeed familiar, which enabled the organization to prioritize tactic reasoning over emotional management. However, the pandemic for XR was not the only factor entering into play at that stage. Indeed, adaptations were taken not only to face the emergency scenario (which, in

the meanwhile, had become a post-emergency one). Developments external to the pandemic must be brought into the picture. Indeed, in 2021, the Pre-COP26 was held in Milan. XR saw in it an opportunity to garner visibility and to create momentum around the climate crisis. To this aim, negotiation took place and subsequent adjustments taken to exploit this scenario. In particular, activists debated on the most effective tactics to exert pressure on institutional representatives that would have been in Milan during the pre-COP days. As a result of negotiation, activists deemed strategic "to start networking with other grassroots SMOs in Milan in order to agree on what to do in those days to act in a coordinated manner" (I21 – XR Milan). Networking developed with other social movement organizations of Milan, including several social centres among which Lambretta. This network, however, was dismantled with time as considered no longer strategic. Indeed, *threat attribution* entered into play for both reasons connected and unconnected to the pandemic context.

On the one hand, XR itself experienced a shift from heightened expectations for Covid-triggered societal change into disillusion. Interestingly, when asked about the reasons for the absence of a large scale mobilisation in the city of Milan, it attributed it to the long-run absence of a progressive in the left capable of igniting a broad mobilisation. Such a context was interpreted hence as a missed opportunity in which protest potential translated into individual indignation rather than collective rebellion. On the other, the strategic misalignments within the progressive movement front born for acting in a coordinated manner led to the dissolution of the network. This attests to a dynamic of re-equilibration; however, according to its activists, the supposed critical juncture for XR was not the pandemic outbreak but the pre-COP 26.

Table 8. Post-emergency changes of Extinction Rebellion Milan

	Changes at symbolic level	*Changes at organizational level*		
Collective actor	**Collective identity**	**Strategy**	**Repertoire of action**	Organization
XR Milan	Continuity	Continuity	Continuity	Continuity

6.4 Conclusions

This chapter looked at the process of post-Covid emergency change of six progressive social movement organizations in the city of Milan. Five of them belonged to the milieu of the urban self-managed social centres while Extinction Rebellion Milan was the local group of the transnational movement Extinction Rebellion. The analysis was devoted to untangle the key mechanisms and constitutive sub-mechanisms at work in sustaining those movement groups' processes of transformation after the pandemic emergency. In these conclusions, I will first summarize the main

evidence from the analysis, namely the mechanisms found and their combination. Then, I will linger on how similar combination of mechanisms generated different outcomes across actors' trajectories. I will ascribe this difference to different endogenous factors and specifically to the different pre-pandemic path actors had. Final space is devoted to how change in the temporality of the emergency influenced actors' transformation pathways in the medium-run.

As far as XR Milan is concerned, its trajectory of change did not manifested into any significant medium-term change. Adjustments occurred at a later stage compared to other case studies and were not even entirely explained by the pandemic, but by the occurrence of COP26. A re-equilibration dynamic took place, bringing back the actor to its pre-pandemic conditions.

As far as the social centres are concerned, their trajectory was marked at the initial stages by the patterned combination of *adjustments*, *ties building* and *bridging*. As soon as the pandemic out-broke, negotiation placed movement organizations in front of the strategic dilemma of how to react to the spread of Covid-19 virus and its consequences. Decision to adopt direct social action implied engaging in adjustments to adapt repertoire and organizational apparatus, on the short-term, to the suddenly changed context. Engaging in needs provision triggered ties building between SMO's activists and two new publics: volunteers and beneficiaries. The former were all those people suddenly more prone to get their hands-on in the making thanks to the time 'liberated' from work by the temporality of emergency. The latter were beneficiaries of help, neighbourhood-based individuals in situation of health and socio-economic vulnerability. The building of social bonds with these communities – as well as bonds strengthening among pre-existing activists – resulted in a bridging of organizations' social environments. Actors opened to the outside, broadened their reach and territorialized their action, making themselves permeable to enlarged publics. Of course, bridging was all the more salient in actors' trajectories according to their pre-pandemic perimeter of action. For example, it did not activate in the case of Rimake since it had already a bridged social environment, having recently reworked its identity around the idea of being a common good within the neighbourhood. Bridging developed in synchrony with energization and cognitive broadening. The rise of a burgeoning grassroots solidarity movement in the middle of dramatic and unprecedented events made actors perceive a potential for social mobilization grounded in an a supposed 'collective awakening'. This perception was reinforced by the social legitimation coming from the surrounding community. Providing for needs indeed had an impact on social centres' public image. It indeed progressively spurred their social recognisability as points of reference within the neighbourhood, which further fostered bonds of solidarity and ties of reciprocity between actors and the neighbourhood. At the same time, bridging opened actors' eyes to the existence of an extra-health dimension of the emergency, making them experiment with situations of poverty and

inequality which paved for an enlargement of cognitive visions. As time passed by, and the health emergency context became more familiar, actors interrogated how to adjust strategy to a new context change. As the temporality of normalcy progressed, indeed, they made an assessment of the repertoire and the organizational forms as they had been adjusted to the emergency in light of reducing resources overtime. In particular, the previous surge in participation gradually waned while the intense emotions that had galvanized action during the emergency gave way to a sense of collective fatigue as well as to a normalisation of the prospects of change possible. These dynamics, that I referred to as resource depletion, had been experienced cross-cuttingly across social centres. Yet resource depletion yielded into two different mechanisms according to whether it combined with threat or opportunity attribution. When co-occurring with opportunity attribution, it generated *renovation*. That was the case for Lambretta, Rimake and Collective 20092, which sedimented the emergency-induced adjustments and further transformed them. In particular, renovation took two forms: i) rearranging direct social action in order to boost prefiguration and meet decreased resources ii) expanding its repertoire by enlarging the forms of direct social action proposed. When combining with threat attribution, it activated *re-equilibration*. That was the case of Zam, which re-equilibrated its perimeter of action to its pre-pandemic features. It indeed recognised the end of the strategic utility of the Brigade in face of what it perceived as closing opportunities. The last mechanism marking the trajectories of change of social centres was *identity shift*. This characterized in particular Rimake, Lambretta and Collective 20092. The three actors blurred their identity boundaries. Rimake's identity ended overlapping with the "You're not alone project". While before the pandemic the project was only a theoretical intuition, during the emergency it became concrete via DSA and was recognised as the boundary for activists to represents themselves among each other and to the surrounding environment. In the case of Lambretta and Collective 20092, the input provided by the stabilisation of emergency-driven participants and the decision to invest, stemming from the positive experience of the Brigade, on a strategy that kept together claim making and needs provision, led to a blurred identity that kept together who actors were before the pandemic and who actors became thanks to the experience of the Brigade. The blurring identities were hence a consequence of blurring practices. The most significant outcome in this regard was observed in Lambretta, which transitioned from being an inward-looking community of militants with an informal structure to a hybrid constituency situated between political mobilization and volunteerism, organized through a formal association known as Mutuo Soccorso Milano.

These results point to relevant cross-cutting mechanisms whose relevance, however, depended on the interaction with pre-existing conditions. Specifically, the pathways of actors that underwent

major changes were characterized by the sequence of ties transformation→bridging → renovation → identity shift. *Ties transformation* and *bridging* were pivotal in shaping the trajectories of Lambretta and Collective 20092. It was thanks to the unlocking of the perimeter of their action, to their reach to a wider audience and to the social bonds forged with volunteers and activists that they decided to definitively change their strategy and, as a consequence, their identity. Having had to change their organizational structure with the Brigade and having left it in place granting, by doing so, access channels to previously non-mobilised people, favoured the blurring of their identity in the medium-run. These dynamics also show that actors amidst the emergency have been engaged mainly in an identity remaking work, which followed an emergency-induced innovation of collective action repertoires. This, in turn, suggests that transformations were of greater extent where adjustments determined a greater departure from pre-pandemic paths. In light of this, if we are to put the transformations of social centres along a continuum, we would have at the extremes Zam and Lambretta representing instances minimum and maximum change, respectively. The few changes Zam exhibited after the emergency, hence, did not alter its pre-pandemic boundaries. Lambretta, instead, transitioned from being a traditional social centre focused on protest actions to an hybrid actor between a social centre and a formal association that "despises the cops, collaborates with Emergency and holds meetings with local councillors" (I3 - Lambretta). With the institution of 'Mutuo Soccorso Milano', it ended up embracing an interpretation of how to make conflict completely different from the previous one. At the centre of the continuum, we would have first Rimake and then Collective 20092. For Rimake, post-emergency changes were minimal, representing a continuation of its pre-pandemic trajectory but with an emphasis on its project "Non sei solo/non sei sola" as a central identity marker. This was also true also by looking at the adjustments it had to made. Having already started experimenting with DSA before the pandemic, it just had to reconfigure online and at an accelerated pace the work it was already doing. Changes in repertoire, as well, were not the result of a greater cognitive grip on surrounding reality (cognitive broadening), but stemmed from pre-pandemic reflections on social needs. The case of Collective 20092, finally, represents a case of significant transformations not as path breaking as in the case of Lambretta. Collective 20092 indeed was born as a housing squat with the aim to shelter migrant homeless families. Hence, it already had some experience with needs provision and in the past it already had engaged in some forms of DSA which it had had to suspend due to a lack in resources. Therefore, the more relevant transformations for it were not in terms of practices but in terms of participation and, hence, identity. The Collective, indeed, as was the case of Lambretta, was experiencing a phase of decline and self-enclosing before the pandemic. The fact that the Brigade had created social capital bring in new energies was interpreted as an opportunity to exploit.

Accordingly, this interpretation was precisely influenced by the declining phase the Collective was experiencing before March 2020. For Collective 20092 – like for Zam, it was an opportunity to overcome it.

The last point I would like to touch upon regards the issue of time. Throughout data, the process of movement groups transformation appears to be characterized by two phases: an emergency-phase and a post-emergency phase, each bearing its set of challenges and opportunities for actors. During the emergency, there was more cross-cutting convergence among actors in terms of sequence of mechanisms playing out in their trajectories. Divergence in patterns, interestingly, emerged when actors had to decide whether or not to stabilise emergency-induced adjustments. That was a turning point in which decisions likely to bear long-term consequences had to be made. It was in that moment of negotiation over the future that the antecedent conditions exerted the greatest influence. Indeed, during the emergency, direct social action was one of the few options on the table for being active in a context under lockdown. In post-emergency times, however, actors thoroughly reflected on sedimentation, renovation or re-equilibration according to who they wanted to become in the medium-run. Their interpretation of the decision to maintain or dismantle, like in Zam case, DSA, with all the consequences in terms of organization configuration, strategy and identity, was taken on the basis of a careful assessment which put in synergy antecedent conditions, contingent dynamics and perspectives regarding the selves of the future.

CHAPTER 7

Pathways of change in Paris after Covid-19 emergency

7.1 Introduction

This second empirical chapter delves into the process of transformation of French movement groups in the framework of the pandemic. In particular, it discusses the sequence of mechanisms that have shaped the post-emergency pathways of change of five Paris-based actors: the Yellow Vests of Montreuil, the Interprofessional collective of the 18th district, Nous Toutes Paris North, the Brigades of Popular Solidarity, Extinction Rebellion Paris North and *Droit au logement*. The presentation of evidence of change and of its constituting dynamics is organized around the identification of three types of organization. These differ for the mechanisms generating the process and/or their concatenation – and thus the type of pattern that supports the transformation process – as well as for the mechanisms' constituting sub-mechanisms. Each section scrutinizes a type of organization illustrating the sequences of mechanisms and sub-mechanisms that have shaped actors' pathways of change, as well as the forms and extents of each actors' change. Specifically, at beginning of each section, a first table shows the sequence of mechanisms and sub-mechanisms that characterized the transformation trajectories of the organizations under observation. At the end of them, a second table illustrates the post-pandemic changes of the actors according to the level at which they occurred: symbolic (collective identity) or instrumental (strategy; organization; repertoire of action; focus of action). The two tables must be read in tandem: while the latter takes a photograph of the actor at the end of the process of post-Covid transformation – presenting, in other words, the outcomes of the transformation or the "what" of change - the former reconstructs their generating steps - the "how" of change.

In light of this presentation skeleton, Section 7.2 addresses the pathway of change of the Yellow Vests of Montreuil of the Interprofessional collective of the 18th arrondissement. These were marked by the same mechanisms yet with varying constituting sub-mechanisms, which, as I will show, explain the differences in their medium-term changes, with particular regard to the collective identity level. Section 7.3 is devoted to the paths of the Brigades and of Nous Toutes Paris North. These have a very similar pathway and they both exhibited a major post-emergency change at the level of collective identity. Section 7.4 details the trajectories of Extinction Rebellion and *Droit au logement*. They present different mechanisms sustaining the process of change but, out of all the other cases, they show greater continuity compared to their pre-pandemic trajectory. Section 7.5

summarizes the findings from the Parisian cases and engages in a brief discussion of how they relate to the research questions of the dissertation.

7.2 Yellow Vests and Interprofessional collective of 18th *arrondissement*

The first type of organization comprises the Yellow Vests and the Interprofessional collective of the 18th district. The pathways of post-emergency change of these two movement organizations were characterized by the same concatenation of mechanisms, namely: *boundary activation*, *ties transformation, identity shift* and *bridging* (Table 9). Despite experiencing the same pattern activating the process of change, differences in constituting sub-mechanisms laid the ground to distinct post-emergency outcomes (for a full overview, see Table 10 at the end of the section). In order to understand how this dynamics played out, it is necessary to step back and start first illustrating how each mechanism unravelled at case level.

Table 9. Pathway of post-emergency change of the Yellow Vests of Montreuil and Interpro by mechanisms and sub-mechanisms

Collective Actor	*Mechanisms and Sub-mechanisms*			
Yellow Vests	**Boundary Activation** Negotiation; Cleavages	**Ties transformation** Ties weakening	**Identity shift** Depoliticization	**Bridging** Networking; Rooting.
Interprofessional Collective of 18th (Interpro)	**Boundary Activation** Negotiation; Cleavages	**Ties transformation** Ties weakening; Ties strengthening; Threat attribution	**Identity shift** Radicalization	**Bridging** Networking; Rooting.

Boundary activation

At the outbreak of the pandemic, the first mechanism marking the trajectory of Yellow Vests and Interpro was *boundary activation*. Literature defined it as "the creation of a new boundary or the crystallization of an existing one between challenging groups and their targets" (Tilly and Tarrow 2015:36) as well as the "increase in the salience of 'us-them' distinction separating two political actors (Alimi et al.: 287). In this work, I mean it to indicate the solidification of a fracture within a collective group and precisely between different factions within the same organization. The pandemic in this sense worked as an activator of a pre-existing cleavage within both Interpro and

the Yellow Vests. To illuminate this mechanism, let us start with its first component, *negotiation*. The outbreak of a deadly virus was something completely new and unexpected. Both the Yellow Vests and Interpro were faced with the challenge of figuring out how to respond to this sudden and drastic change. The contentious character of the pandemic sparked internal debates about how to make sense of the event and how to react to it. The term 'negotiation' captures well these ongoing discussions. During emergencies like a global pandemic, things are chaotic and uncertain and organizations have to adapt quickly. In particular, the disruption faced was so massive that it was difficult for organizations to use their past experiences to figure out what to do next. In the cases at hand, it was extremely unclear what the best course of action would be because the circumstances were completely new. The emergency posed by a deadly virus brought about ethical dilemmas, which made it challenging for SMOs to come to a consensus on a unified position. Hence, emergency-bounded *negotiation* signals a dynamic of within-group discussion likely to be marked by a suspension and questioning of as-usual practices. The sense of disorientation was particularly pronounced in the case of Interpro because the very *raison d'être* of the collective was the struggle against the pension reform, abruptly put on hold by the lockdown:

"We were in the midst of the pension mobilization when this thing happened. And that's what's crazy about it. In two days, we go from actively challenging the government, the power, to staying at home, keeping quiet, and supporting. It's quite a crazy thing. So, at that moment, everything is a bit bizarre, meaning that you can't see the people from the Interpro anymore, etc. Everyone has a reflex at the same time, anyway, there's this thing of saying, "let's go back to our organizations, let's discuss the political situation". And to see what's happening. We discuss it and we discuss what politically the period means. And there, very, very,very few were saying we should not accept the confinement policy, a tiny minority said we should not accept the confinement policy."

(IR8- Interpro)

It is interesting to note that negotiation took place after activists had in the first place engaged in an interpretation of the crisis within the circuit of the original organizations they belonged to[59]. This attests to the blurred identity of Interpro, which worked more as an organizational structure of the resistance to the pension reform. A second dynamic working closely with negotiation was the disagreement among activists over the group's strategy in front of the pandemic. I refer to this it via the cognitive sub-mechanism *cleavages*. Within-group *negotiation* was indeed marked by contested discussions and tensions among members. Despite the sub-mechanism's similarity in the two cases, the reasons for internal divisions differed. In the case of Interpro, everyone agreed the virus was serious. But activists had different attitudes towards the State's handling of the pandemic, polarising

[59] As mentioned in Chapter 5, Intepro was an ad-hoc organization born with the specific aim of organizing the anti-pension struggle at neighbourhood level. Many of its members were individuals who had previously been involved in other groups.

into a pro/anti-lockdown cleavage. On the one hand, a majoritarian side considered the lockdown as a legitimate measure necessary to contain the spread of a dangerous and unfamiliar virus. Others, a smaller group, saw the government's response as too repressive – interviewees frequently stressed their rejection of "the police management of the pandemic" (IR1, Interpro) – and believed it was just another way for the ruling class to maintain power over the working class. These views were grounded in the clear Marxist-Leninist ideological foundation of this part of Interpro. From these rivalling interpretations of the pandemic management, different strategies emerged. In order to prevent the virus from spreading further, the majoritarian side's consensus was to shift to online organizing and to develop 'quarantined' ways to keep the movement going (Petitjean 2022). This approach aimed to adapt the movement's activities during confinement in preparation for a revolutionary future post-emergency, as they were confident that it would occur. On the contrary, a minority worried this approach might tame contention. They felt that 'the show must go on', meaning conflict should continue, as pausing it would make it weaker in the long run. Hence, it is unsurprising that the strategic approach advocated by this faction involved preserving the pre-pandemic momentum by concrete action, even in presence of legal impediments.

In the case of the Yellow Vests, the opposite dynamic set in motion. Most activists shared the view that the government's handling of the crisis was authoritarian. However, they disagreed on how serious the virus was, with some leaning towards conspiracy theories[60]. This basic divergence triggered *cleavages* on other pandemic-related issues, including how the group should approach self-care. The pandemic brought attention to the importance of taking care of oneself within activist circles, which raised questions about how to interact with other activists and whether to follow national restrictions in activist environments. Militants divided between those who stressed the need for "popular health self-care" (IR3 – Yellow Vests) within the group and those who dismissed these ideas as extreme and authoritarian, labelling proponents as "Covid freaks-out" (IR4 – Yellow Vests). A Yellow Vest member defined the latter as "those who had health anxiety and were completely on board with the discourse regarding masks" (ibidem), a position that implied criticism towards those who endorsed compliance with anti-contagion measures.

In both organizations, emergency-related *cleavages* did not come out of nowhere; they tapped into pre-existing fractures and, in doing so, they generated the mechanism *boundary activation*. In the case of Interpro, the pro/against State cleavage was not an isolated incident but reiterated antecedent

[60] As the pandemic progressed, these positions diversified, ranging from those opposed to the vaccine, to those against it, and to those against the green pass but in favour of the vaccine itself.

tensions regarding the aim of the mobilization. The majoritarian side believed that Interpro should focus primarily on coordinating opposition to the pension reform, rallying support from professional sectors in the neighbourhood actively involved in the struggle. On the other hand, a minority advocated for broadening the movement to include unengaged sectors, aiming to expand grassroots mobilization beyond workplaces. In this backdrop, the pandemic introduced only another layer of disagreement. The majority agreed on the need to withdraw from conflict and abide by lockdown policies, while the minority argued for disobeying restrictions and keeping fuelling the frenzy of the previous months. This is how one of the minority's exponents described the reasons behind their positions:

"[…] we refuse the police management of the pandemic. It's a public health issue, not a matter to handle via police in the street. […] And before, they had beaten, gassed healthcare workers in the streets and all that. So, it's them who brought the public hospital to its knees and then they come to explain to us that because there are no more masks, there are no more healthcare workers and all that, we have to stay at home. No, we will never let that pass. And in fact, our compass is "we are against the State, we are against the police, and we are against Macron" and even in the case of a pandemic, this is shared by many members of the interpro and we continue to be active during the lockdown".

(IR1 – Interpro)

Activists embedded their opposition to pandemic management within recent history. Until early March 2020, president Emmanuelle Macron implemented austerity plans in public hospitals and refused to attend to the claims of hospital workers who conducted the longest strike in the sector in French history starting in March 2019. Hence, Intepro's minority struggled to show the inconsistency and hypocrisy of the governments' handling of the crisis. The 'union rhetoric', by which Macron sought to build a durable base for consensus amidst the crisis was in contradiction with its attitude until shortly before.

In the case of Yellow Vests, disagreements over how to handle healthcare at internal level mirrored a cleavage between those who saw the pandemic as an opportunity to initiate a collective dialogue on the political role of care in activists spaces and those who opposed this perspective. This has been well expressed by a former activist of the Yellow Vests:

"For me, the main question was solidarity among us and the protection of each other, the 'care,' 'taking care of each other,' care, that's what was at issue. It was about whether we fight together, not just to talk politics, as we don't give a damn about ourselves, or whether we also fight together with one of the concerns being that we take care of one another, not just when we end up in police custody, but also in our everyday lives on an emotional level. Are we an affinity group or not? There was really this thing that if we're not even capable of taking care of each other, as well as others, what legitimacy do we have to call ourselves Yellow vests?"

(IR2- Yellow Vests)

The pandemic's spotlight on the issue of care prompted the Yellow Vests to reassess their collective identity. As explained in Chapter 5, indeed, activists were already grappling with the issue of

legitimacy in still defining themselves as "Yellow Vests," having the movement they originated from, were part of and which had given them their primary *raison d'etre*, faded away. Covid-19, hence, hit upon an open issue and furthered the path of redefinition of the basics that bounded the group together. On the one hand, there was a part of the group more hesitant to address the issue of care from a political standpoint. They were stuck in what one interviewee described as the "insurrectional fantasy of the movement" (IR5 – Yellow vests), insisting on continuing the strategies and actions used during the peak of the movement. On the other hand, another faction advocated for focusing more on the issue of care and urged for a transformation of the group to rebuild the reasons to remain united. In this sense, discussions on the political significance of care emerged as a potential avenue in the ongoing quest for collective identity and strategic redefinition. Notably, care was seen both as a means to resignify collective bonds (described as "a new foundational terrain of any present and future struggle" -, IR5 - Yellow Vests) and as an additional political practice, opening avenues to complement the traditional confrontational tactics of the movement with a prefigurative approach (Yates 2015). While the main goals of achieving more democracy and social justice remained unchallenged, the arrival of Covid-19 prompted a revaluation of the means to attain them. It raised enquires about how to resignify effectiveness within a backdrop marked not only by a decline already underway in Yellow Vests activity but also by new challenges to action posed by Covid-19.

Ties transformation

Yellow Vests and Interpro have then known a *ties transformation* dynamic. In both cases, internal fractures eventually led to the *weakening* of the relational bonds among group members. This resulted first and foremost in the withdrawal of part of the groups. In the case of Interpro, the majority of group members left the collective. Overall, only ten out of the 80 people who regularly attended Interpro assemblies before the pandemic remained active. In the case of the Yellow Vests, divisions on the evolutionary destiny of the group and on the attitude towards care at internal level, along with biographic reasons – on which Covid-19 had an indirect effect – led to a significant participation drop, specifically of the people that had pushed more in the direction of effectiveness' resignification. However, despite *ties transformation* operating in both cases, in Interpro case it took place per effect of two further sub-mechanisms: *ties strengthening* and *threat attribution*.

Indeed, the decision of the 10 remaining individuals to mobilise during the lockdown – the minority I spoke of in the previous paragraph – activated in parallel the opposite dynamic, namely *ties strengthening*. While on the one hand social ties were shrinking among Intepro members, on the other, those among the few who had decided to remain active under confinement were reinforcing:

"the core tightened, because in fact, we experienced the lockdown, saying, but we won't let ourselves be pushed around. We will continue to put up posters. We will even organize demonstrations for the public hospital. We were, I would say, between 10 and 20 people who have stayed, and who, even with the lockdown, wanted to continue, didn't want to say we're going home, we're stopping politics".

(IR1 – Interpro)

The more ties weakened within Interpro, the more the minority remained active began perceiving itself as distinguished from its original organization. In particular, *attribution of threat* contributed to solidify the bonds in the making. Facing challenges of agency in a difficult environment and needing to strategize on how to organize action to avoid penalties strengthened indeed the emotional and social connections among those who remained. This contrasts the situation in the Yellow Vests group, where the withdrawal of some members only led to *ties weakening* without a corresponding strengthening. The way the two organizations differently transformed their social connections during the emergency had consequences for their paths of transformation in terms of unmaking of remaking of collective identity, as detailed below.

Identity shift

Both Interpro and Yellow Vests were marked by a dynamic of identity shift. *Identity shift* is a cognitive mechanism defined by Tilly and Tarrow as the "formation of new identities within challenging groups whose coordinated action brings them together and reveals their commonalities" (2007:37) and as "alteration in shared definitions of a boundary between two political actors and of relations across that boundary" (Mcadam et al.:162). Considering the sequence of mechanisms so far explored, the combination of *boundary activation* and *ties transformation* in the framework of the pandemic emergency worked as a source of identity shift in Interpro and Yellow Vests cases. However, identity shift took on two different configurations in the two cases, in accordance with the specificity of actors' pre-pandemic conditions. Interpro embarked a dynamic of radicalisation while the Yellow Vests resulted more and more depoliticised.

In the case of Interpro, *identity shift* was the direct consequence of the decision of a minority to continue offline struggle even during the lockdown. The members of that minority recognised in their rejection of pandemic State management the exact moment when they stopped being part of Interpro. During interviews, they referred to it as a momentous turning point for identity reconstruction:

"we did not want to be confined at home and have nothing to say. And I think that's the founding act of *18eme en lutte*. It's that we are neighbourhood activists who decide not to accept the lockdown policy"

(IR1 – Interpro)

The need to persist with offline struggle led this minority to realise it was impossible to continue acting collectively as Interpro. Recognizing that their strategic goals misaligned with those of their former Interpro fellows, they felt the urge to find a new way to identify together. This drove the foundation of *18eme en lutte,* an anti-capitalist neighbourhood-based collective. *Identity shift* unfolded, hence, via the creation of a new collective subject by a minority of former Interpro activists who decided to remain active during the lockdown. The genetic moment of *18eme en lutte* is well elucidated by one of its founding members:

"The lockdown came right in the midst of the pension battle and it put a direct end to it. We were still at the time about twenty people to continue to meet virtually, and it's there that we decided to have a somewhat direct intervention during the lockdown […] so we started making a series of posters to put up all over the 18th during our time out […] but when it came time to sign it, it was challenging to continue on behalf of the Interprofessional group. The Interprofessional group had rallied around the issue of pensions with a whole series of political support, we had the endorsement from a lot of organizations [while] we found ourselves in the Covid period where almost all left-wing organizations acquiesced to the state of health emergency."

(IR8 - Interpro)

What made it "challenging" to continue signing group documents with the name of Interpro was not only the lack of within-group consensus on the decision to have a "somewhat direct intervention during the lockdown" but a broader strategic misalignment which extended towards the spectrum of left-wing organizations which supported Interpro. Interpro indeed was a coordination platform against the pension reform which had acted as a convergence issue of pre-existing mobilisations and actors under a common umbrella. Continuing to identify with that name would have also implied to be supported by a range of left-wing actors who may not have been aligned with opposing the pandemic management, as most of them "acquiesced to the state of health emergency". *Identity shift* took on a radicalisation path because the minority who founded *18eme en lutte* had a markedly radical left political background. In this sense, the unmaking of Interpro's collective identity could be effectively followed by the radical remaking of a new one because this minority shared the same political compass. Several members of the minority were indeed militants of the New anticapitalistic party (*Nouveau Parti anticapitaliste*, NPA) and had a record of long-run activism within the local social movement milieu. Consequently, they were already familiar with each other, which established a capital of trust prior to the pandemic. This pre-existing trust ultimately facilitated the shift in identity. Action indeed brought them together and made previously existing commonalities, until the pandemic left in the background, politically meaningful. Overall, the unmaking of the identity of Interpro unfolded as the collective glue was no longer the common opposition toward the pension reform plan but the common allegiance to a specific political culture.

In the case of the Yellow Vests, rather than yielding a significant re-making of the identity, the combination of *boundary activation* and *ties transformation* led the Yellow Vests to become, to use one of the activists' words, nothing but "a discussion club", as prominently emphasized by one of their former activists:

"I felt that there was no political stance, no political potential, in fact, within our group. What we had were merely people who came to debate, and the structures we put in place lacked analysis, lacked coherence in determining what could be implemented or not. There was no intention to deconstruct or construct political positions or behaviours towards others. Essentially, it no longer had... for me, it was not anymore politically intriguing, you see[...]".

(IR-3 Yellow Vests)

Identity shift in the Yellow Vests case unfolded as a depoliticization dynamic. The very label of "Yellow Vests" became nothing but an empty signifier, reminiscent of old contentious times but unable to adapt to a transformed context. However, it is crucial not to understand this as a mechanic outcome of the pandemic emergency. Rather, the pandemic accelerated underlying tendencies. As emphasized above, it acted as a battlefield among competing interpretations (Pleyers 2020) and in doing so it worked for the Yellow Vests as a turning point to decide the collective direction to pursue. To understand identity shift in this case, let us consider two examples: the issue of anti-vax positions and the transformation of the solidarity kitchen. During informal conversations, several former Yellow Vests highlighted that anti-vax stances were not necessarily problematic per se but rather as potentially pinpointing to a desire for the re-appropriation of knowledge and of truth. However, this potential did not concretize for the lack of a common political will to construct a political discourse around the vaccine issue. The transformation of the solidarity kitchen is another telling case. Originally conceived as a direct social action (Bosi and Zamponi 2015), as a site for debate and politicization, today there is no scheduled time specifically dedicated to these activities. Furthermore, it is run by a core group of the Yellow Vests plus a plethora of people gravitating around them yet not defining themselves as part of the movement. This dynamic is framed as positive by those who are still active, as one participant stated: "anyone declaring herself a Yellow Vest is a Yellow Vest..[..]" (IR4- Yellow Vests), hinting that the definition of being a Yellow Vest, who they are, has evolved significantly over time, resulting in various forms of involvement today. Overall, the collective existence of the group and participation in protests seemed more like default choices out of habit rather than coming from a deliberate, shared discussion about political events and then developing a united stance on them. Today, also those remaining in the group struggle to

understand what keeps them together, what still makes them Yellow Vests[61]. It is interesting to note that the Yellow Vests themselves addressed the issue in a leaflet they created during the pension reform movement in 2023. It was titled "Why are we still Yellow Vests?" and explained why they continued their collective action even four years after the movement began. This included fighting for “social, fiscal and climate justice, right to housing, independent medias and opposing laws that restrict freedoms” (Yellow Vests leaflet, 7/03/2023). In essence, the group had brought back the same issues that had been important to the movement years earlier. For one of those who exited the group on the wake of Covid-19, those words were a sterile rehashing of identifying themes that made sense back then but had now lost their meaning:

> “these are big words that have been thrown around for the past 4 years... 4 years ago, if you asked them what they meant by these words, they would have answered, but now it's demoralizing... there's no discourse, no analysis, no common practice. People go off on their own to do their own thing, it's just a club.”
>
> (IR5 – Yellow Vests)

In this sense, Covid -19 emergency hastened the downward trajectory of a movement already in decline.

Bridging

The last mechanism in the pathway of change of Intepro and the Yellow Vests is *Bridging*. It indicates the progressive expansion of the boundaries of the social environment in which action unfolds with the aim – more or less explicit – of increasing struggle salience. Actors’ progressive bridging with their environment was made possible by the combination of two sub-mechanisms. The first of them is what I define as *networking*. This sub-mechanism captures the building or expansion of an actor’s network of social and political ties. The second sub-mechanism is *rooting*. It indicates the enhancement of the territorial dimension of an actor’s action by fostering ties of vicinity and reciprocity within a local community, building collective belongings in a determined spatial and relational context.

For the Yellow Vests in Montreuil, Covid-19 emergency further solidified a process already underway: *rooting* in the local community. This involved a progressive intertwinement with

[61] This issue is extensively present in my field notes from Yellow Vests’ weekly assemblies. This is an example, out of a discussion on the involvement of the Yellow Vests in the mobilisations against the 2023 pension reform: “A. asks the group if they are still a collective, underlining that she has been asked many times [during those days of mobilisation] whether the Yellow Vests were doing anything at collective level. “So what are we doing all together?” she asks “just changing the wording to a leaflet? Haven’t we planned other actions, other projects?”. She raises doubts about being able to say, when participating in a demonstration alone, that one is there *on behalf of* the Yellow Vests. That triggers a lively discussion on the topic. Some people emphasize that the existence of a solidarity canteen and of a weekly assembly is what makes them still Yellow Vests. Others recognise the necessity to organize more regularly group actions to reclaim visibility. P. underscores that, although the unity of the past may be lacking, this is also a symptom of the fact that the movement has changed to allow each individual to find their own place in the struggle” (Fieldnote, Yellow Vests weekly assembly, 14/03/2023).

Montreuil's social movement milieu, which had started few months before the pandemic with the establishment of a popular canteen. The post-emergency territorial rooting of the group was facilitated by the fact that the Yellow Vests operated within a collective managed space (AERI) alongside other local movement groups. This made both the territorialisation of their action and the expansion of their network easier. For example, networks were primarily developed with groups based at AERI such as the *Collectif of Sans Papier Montreuil* ("Collective of undocumented migrants of Montreuil"), an anti-food waste collective and collectives from various squats. AERI, serving as an organizational hub for local battles, functioned as both a territorial enclave and a network hub. Against this facilitating background, the health emergency acted as an accelerator of *bridging*. In particular, it shaped the awareness that "we needed to share our practices" (IR5 – yellow Vests) as well as emphasizing the importance of local inter-struggle solidarity. In the words of an activist:

"During the Yellow Vests movement, there was a strong willingness to confront and oppose the power and all the institutions of power, including the police, the state, local authorities, organized political powers, etc. But after the pandemic, there was no longer this posture, in fact, conflict arises from the micro instances, the micro spaces of solidarity, and solidarity with struggles and with people who are born and who grow, who solidify, who take root. For me, that's really the main change..."

(IR5 – Yellow Vests)

The pandemic enhanced a diversification in the focus of conflict from the national to the local level in order to foster struggle's salience. This was at the basis of rooting and networking dynamics in the Yellow Vests. I use purposefully the verb "enhanced" because, to reiterate, this was a path only deepened by the emergency. In particular, it highlighted the relevance of pluralising the *loci* of contention, from the square to the micro-level spaces where solidarity with people and with other struggles could be built. As the lockdown lifted, a convergence of struggles took place, substantiating in the strengthening of networks at AERI level. The establishment of the group *Interlutte* ("inter-struggle") is a clear example of this dynamic. It included representatives from various collectives that operated within the space, including the Yellow Vests. During times of emergency, Interlutte functioned as a coordination platform to organize the shared space of AERI, ensuring that the management of the communal space prioritized the health and well-being of activists. As the normalcy was restored, it became an organizational arena to set up cross-issues mobilisations. Networking facilitated not only the bridging of struggles but also the exchange of organizing practices. This was evident in the shift of the food provision system employed by the Yellow Vests for their solidarity kitchen, transitioning from purchasing from large-scale retailers to salvaging discarded food. Two key factors drove this change. Firstly, Covid-19 provided an

opportunity for reflection on structural inequalities. Specifically, the stark disparity between the profits of large-scale distribution and the worsening deprivation experienced by people during the emergency significantly influenced this decision. Secondly, the Interlutte group served as a platform for knowledge sharing and mutual learning. Particularly noteworthy was the reflection initiated by the Brigades on food autonomy, a concept they had already embraced, which inspired the Yellow Vests to move in a similar direction.

In the case of Interpro, *bridging* was indirectly linked to the pandemic. Indeed, it was the result of the shift in identity from Interpro to *18eme en lutte*. As an anti-capitalist neighbourhood collective, *18eme en lutte* actively set in motion a *networking* dynamic by creating connections with several other local movement actors belonging to the far left political spectrum, including neighbourhood feminist collectives, la Marche des solidarités (a pro-immigrants inter-collective) as well as local committees of political parties and trade unions such as La France Insoumise Paris 18e, Sud Solidaries and the Communist French Party, among others. Two factors enabled *networking*. First, the founders of *18e en lutte* were already neighbourhood militants before the pandemic outbreak. Hence, they were endowed with a first-hand knowledge of the territory and a relational capital they could use to consolidate a network of partner organizations. Second, as in the case of the Yellow Vests, also *18e en lutte* had its headquarters in a shared space, the local branch of the CGT union. This choice helped them to connect with the union and get involved in local issues it supported, such as the campaign against the closure of the nearby Bichat Hospital, in which *18e en lutte* became a crucial actor. In addition, a *rooting* dynamic took place as the collective shifted its focus away from a singular national-level issue like the pension reform to encompass various local and national struggles on migration, welfare, antifascism and feminism. *18e en lutte* has increasingly taken part in and actively organized local mobilizations, with the aim of casting light on territorial issues and of bringing national mobilizations at neighbourhood level. Collective action, hence, became more entrenched within the local territory, as was the case of protest marches organized through neighbourhood streets to oppose restrictive migration laws and racism.

Overall, *bridging* followed the strategic turn in *18e en lutte*. Strategy focus shifted from solely organizing local opposition to the pension reform to fostering connections between various mobilizations at local level so that “struggles do not remain isolated, to connect them to each other, to ensure that union activists also participate in anti-racist struggles, that they also participate in feminist struggles" (IR1- Interpro). The radicalization of the collective identity of *18e en lutte*, therefore, should not be interpreted as the establishment of a strictly far-left political organization. Instead, activists emphasized that the flexibility inherent in the collective's organizational structure

enabled them to attract individuals from various political backgrounds, all sharing a common willingness to "take some responsibility for their neighbourhood, the important decisions that affect them, to fight for their public services" (IR17 - Interpro). *18e en lutte* served as a framework where all of these goals could be pursued.

Table 10. Post-emergency changes of Yellow Vests and Interpro

	Changes at symbolic level	*Changes at organizational level*			
Collective actor	**Collective identity**	**Strategy**	**Repertoire of action**	**Focus of action**	**Organization**
Yellow Vests	Missed opportunity of collective identity resignification via a politicization of care. Shift to a "discussion club" signalling Yellow Vests' depoliticization	While confrontational actions are maintained, there is an enhanced focus on less visible activities, like DSA.	Continuity	Continuity	Network expansion; Furthering of the path of rooting within the local social movement milieu
Interpro	Dissolution of Interpro. Creation of *18e en lutte* with a far-left political identity. From an issue-based to an identity-based collective. Collective identity undergoes a process of radicalisation	Rooting at local level with the aim to create connections among different social justice struggles at neighbourhood level	Continuity	Pluralisation of the sectors of mobilisation, from the opposition to the pension reform to a plethora of national and local issues relating to migration, public welfare, antifascism.	Creation of a new collective group; Network expansion and rooting al neighbourhood level.

7.3 Nous Toutes and the Brigades of Popular Solidarity

The second type of organization includes Nous Toutes and the Popular Solidarity Brigades. Both organizations underwent *adjustments*, *ties transformation*, *identity shifts*, and *bridging*, but with some distinctions. In Nous Toutes' case, the adjustments occurred during the emergency and solidified afterward, whereas for the BSPs, they led to further transformation and triggered a *renovation* mechanism (Table 11 below). In terms of transformation outcomes (see Table 12 at the end of the section), the BSP and NT similarly radicalised their collective identity in the medium-run as a result of the piling up of mechanisms not exclusively linked to the temporality of the emergency. Moreover, at organization level, they commonly entrenched more at territorial level and created networks within the territorial movement fabric.

Table 11. Trajectories of post-emergency change of Nous Toutes and the BSPs by mechanisms and sub-mechanisms

Nous Toutes (NT)	**Adjustment** Attribution of opportunity; Contention capacity enhancement.	**Sedimentation** Resource Enhancement; Legitimization.	**Ties transformation** Ties building	**Identity shift** Attribution of opportunity; Cognitive broadening.	**Bridging** Networking; Rooting.
Popular Solidarity Brigades (BSP)	**Adjustment** Attribution of opportunity; Contention capacity enhancement.	**Renovation** Negotiation; Legitimization; Cognitive broadening	**Ties transformation** Ties building; Networking.	**Identity shift** Resource depletion; Ties strengthening;	**Bridging** Networking; Rooting.

Adjustment

The trajectory of Nous Toutes and the BSPs were characterized, in the first place, by a dynamic of *Adjustment*. With it, I refer to short-term adaptations in repertoire of action and/or organization. These were dictated by the imperative to promptly tailor means to emergency times, when actor's previous practices were unsuited to face the mobilization challenges suddenly imposed by the emergency. In Nous Toutes case, *adjustment* took place at the level of both repertoire and organization. As far as the former is concerned, movement and gathering restrictions drove the committee to find alternative spaces to occupy, since the usual physical space was no longer accessible[62]. This led them to engage in social media activism via Instagram. With regard to organization, the committee migrated its internal organization system online via the opening of a channel on Discord. *Adjustment* primarily arose from the appropriation of the emergency context as a context of opportunities for Nous Toutes goals. Consistently, I refer to this dynamic by the sub-mechanism *attribution of opportunity*. The pandemic heightened the salience of the gender issue in the public discourse - the disparities in caregiving responsibilities and the increased risks of domestic violence gained widespread attention during the lockdown – hence opening a discursive opportunity (Koopmans and Olzak 2004) to raise awareness on these topics. The space for

[62] As detailed in Chapter 5, indeed, Nous Toutes, like Extinction Rebellion had concrete offline actions at the forefront of their strategy. Beyond the primary goal of information dissemination, activities such as leafleting, posting posters throughout the city, and renaming streets – all typical pre-pandemic forms of action – were vehicles to assert the importance of women's reclaiming the streets. Their inherent contentiousness lied in very act of implying the occupation of physical public space by women.

achieving the movement's goals – among which increasing public awareness was at the forefront – has expanded. This intertwined with *contention capacity enhancement* of unengaged individuals. This enhanced capacity was distinctive of the temporality of emergency itself. Home confinement made participation in online forms of action less costly. Moreover, it accelerated people's ability to use digital communication tools, thereby enhancing their capacity to engage in the online sphere. The scope of the potentially 'reachable' audience via digital activism, hence, expanded, paving the way for thinking of an organisational structure completely online.

This prompted Nous Toutes committee to use the digital space as both an arena of contention and engagement, which aligned particularly well with the strategic priority of the group to maintain the pre-pandemic momentum. The group coordinator at that time emphasized the awareness of being in a period ripe for strategic reorganization:

"We told ourselves that during this lockdown, we would take advantage of the situation to establish a structure and digital tools that allow us to communicate, capitalize on our activist knowledge, connect people, and organize actions without necessarily having to meet in person. So, that's when we created Discord. We spent a lot of time in small groups, on Zoom, and so on, discussing how to organize, what's the path in relation to the WhatsApp group to get people onto Discord, what kind of welcome message do we give them, you see…to ensure that these individuals join and stay, despite the far-from-ideal situation. We wanted to do it [before the pandemic] but now we could only do that so we did it, we did it seriously, and that's what allows our committee to continue existing today and to have a solid foundation to do so".

(IR5 – Nous Toutes)

The 'far-from-ideal' context of the pandemic pushed them to do something it had wanted to do for a long time: to structure themselves. It indeed accelerated the process of creating an organizational structure that was completely independent from in-person meetings and specific movement entrepreneurs (McCarthy and Zald 1977), who the organization had heavily relied on before. By confining the action space to the online realm, the health emergency enabled the group to prioritize staying active in the short term while also working towards a long-term goal of establishing a flexible organizational structure. which would allow it to remain active regardless of changes in leadership.

In the case of the Brigades, *adjustment* occurred in the context of an actor which presented a constitutive difference to all other cases: it had nothing properly to adjust, since it did not have a pre-pandemic trajectory. The creation of the Brigades themselves can be considered as a form of adjustment in itself, resulting from the activation of a pre-existing network. Their creation was due to the collective recognition of favourable contextual opportunities for engaging in needs response of below, substantiating in a dynamic of *attribution of opportunity*. As emphasized in Chapter 5, opportunities were seen in the emergence of the Brigades in other national contexts - most notably

in Italy - and in the acknowledgement of the existence of a vacuum in the French social movement milieu whereby, differently from Italy, movements had very seldom adopted direct social actions as a way of coping with crisis times. Moreover, the pre-existence of a network belonging to the far left and libertarian movement area added up as an opportunity. At the same time, *contention capacity enhancement* entered into play as the temporality of emergency increased the biographical availability of people, creating favourable conditions for engagement (Zamponi 2023). It was the birth of the Brigades over the lockdown phase of the pandemic.

***Sedimentation* (Nous Toutes)**

Nous Toutes decided to stabilise short-adjustments in the medium-term. Social media activism and the Discord channel were adopted by activists and became part of their normal repertoire. It was the set-off of a *Sedimentation* dynamic. For Nous Toutes, it started through *legitimization. Legitimization* indicates the increasing positive and popularly resonating representations of actors and their actions. Interview data suggest that activists found an increasing resonance between their claims and ongoing societal debates. The pandemic-driven salience of the gender issue bolstered Nous Toutes' legitimacy because:

"the pandemic and the lockdown had finally brought to light, for more people and more quickly, things that we had been saying for a long time […] people realized at home that what we were communicating was real […] it actually accelerated public awareness".

(IR16 - Nous Toutes, Paris North)

The emergency period created a favourable situation for the movement. Their increased online activity coincided with a time when gender issues gained significant social relevance. This resulted in a notable resonance effect, prompting many individuals to get involved, leading to *resource enhancement*. In particular, the greater exposition and visibility granted by the virtualization of activism via Instagram activity and the creation of a Discord channel facilitated recruitment, which resulted in *resource enhancement*. *Resource enhancement* manifested both online, with increased interactions and engagement by non-activists, and offline, as many of the individuals who joined the committee via Instagram during the emergency, took also part in offline activities once restrictions were lifted, as remembered by an activist:

"I remember when we met in person again, it was in June... And we had a meeting where all the core members showed up, so there were about twenty of us, plus people we had never seen before but had spoken to on the phone, and who had come through Instagram, and it was really nice".

(IR16 - Nous Toutes, Paris North)

Digital activism and online organizing did not disappear with the end of the lockdown. Activists continued to use them for action, communication and organization even after the emergency was over. Thereby, they were repeated and structured overtime, namely, they underwent a sedimentation trajectory. The Discord platform replaced the WhatsApp group of the local committee as the primary digital organizational tool. The possibility to have a direct link to Discord indeed reduced intermediate passages to self-orientate in the movement. Between monthly meetings, people were welcomed online, allowing them to get involved in organizing actions without waiting for the next monthly meeting. Set up during the lockdown, the Discord channel became more sophisticated with time. For example, the internal channels multiplied, starting from more procedural ones such as "welcoming and general rules", "roles", "committee info", "reunions" to more sophisticated ones such as "general discussion", dedicated to discussions on feminism and current affairs; "feminist library", a space for sharing suggestions around movies, books and podcasts centring around feminism and "love and relaxation", to spread messages of love, calm and affect.

***Renovation* (BSPs)**

The second mechanism characterizing the trajectory of change of the BSPs was *renovation*. Differently from the *sedimentation* mechanism, *renovation* indicates not only the process of stabilisation of the adjustments put in place to adapt to the emergency but their further transformation. Hence, renovation includes and goes beyond the idea of sedimentation. Needs provision activity did not disappear after the emergency but was repeated, structured overtime and further transformed the actor in the medium-term. The BSPs undertook *renovation* first and foremost via a *negotiation* dynamic. The ad-hoc nature of the BSPs explains why *negotiation* took place at a later stage compared to all the other cases so far analysed. The pandemic, as it emerges from the interview data, was a time for strategy debates. It gave SMOs a chance for meso-level reflection, to figure out what to do, whether to react, and how to do it - basically, a time for *negotiation*. Significantly, this time-out for reflection for the BSPs occurred after the end of the first lockdown, in autumn 2020. The health emergency indeed heightened the need for practical interventions. Consequently, the scope for collective reflection dwindled, as the immediate priority was to swiftly provide for the material needs of a large population. The choice of the form of action adopted played a role as well in the delayed occurrence of *negotiation*. Direct social actions (Bosi and Zamponi 2019) in emergency times demanded pragmatism driven by the pressing urgency to respond under conditions of scarce resources and increasing needs. In the interview data, the BSPs made multiple references to the first lockdown as a period of increased time perception and heightened emotions, during which "it was not clear who we were, you just entered [in the avenue

where the collection and distribution of products took place] and started doing things" (IR13 - BSP). Significantly, until May 2020, the majority of them hadn't even held proper in-person internal assemblies. Physical meetings had occurred, but they had been primarily centred around organizing food distributions and focused heavily on the logistical aspects of providing assistance. In contrast, post-lockdown months unfolded as a phase marked by reflection and introspection. It was at that time that the BSPs engaged in negotiation. They grappled with questions regarding their identity and role in an health context that had only partially evolved. Indeed, despite softer restrictions, the pandemic-related grievances which had driven their creation persisted even in the lockdown's aftermath. The endurance of these grievances activated *legitimization*, because activists perceived their actions as necessary and gained legitimacy from the positive effects that the continuation of their needs-provision activity would have brought about. A source for *legitimization* was also the perspective of fulfilling an underground need for a way of doing militancy differently. When questioned about why they continued their activity after the pandemic, activists stressed that the Brigades provided a structure for people who were already politically aware but lacked an organization. Although born as a way to respond collectively to an emergency, the BSPs addressed a demand for a distinct approach to militancy, hence filling a perceived void in the movement landscape of the city of Paris. This was well explained by a young activist who joined the BSP in March 2021:

"It was a year when I had time because I wasn't studying […] that was the first concrete thing where I directly met people instead of engaging in more general theoretical discussions, which were abundant in Paris, especially when you're young. After a demonstration, you grab a beer and discuss Marx, things you don't really know. This was much more concrete. Especially when I found people who shared common values. I had already visited a ZAD [Zone to Defend] but I was trying to engage in activism on a smaller scale. I lacked a platform, let's say, to truly start doing concrete things. So, for example, this was my first tangible involvement, truly conversing with people. Otherwise, I simply didn't know where to go personally […]".

(IR21 – BSP)

This stands in contrast with what emerged from the data in Milan. Indeed, the practice of direct social actions (DSAs) by movement actors (Bosi and Zamponi 2015) dated back to before the pandemic. Research highlighted their employment in contexts of emergencies and crisis to address material needs with the ultimate aim of building politicisation paths. This was particularly evident during the 2008 economic crisis and its aftermath. Rebuilding community ties through mutual aid activity was strategically seen as laying the social foundation necessary for political activation (Bosi and Zamponi 2019). In most cases, the same Brigades in Milan were not born as *ad-hoc* initiatives but were chosen by actors as means of action within their repertoire of contention (Tilly 1977). That was not the case for France. The BSPs were not put in place by pre-existing actors but were ad-hoc experiences born in response to the Italian call. In France, the separation between political and

social actors was rather neat and explained via the political-humanitarian dichotomy whereby grassroots actors engaged in more traditional contentious actions. This explains much of interviewees' understanding of the BSPs as filling a void in the local social movement milieu. As expressed by one of them

"the pandemic allowed to set up something [a freeshop and a solidarity kitchen] we had been talking about for a long time but we never had the number of activists to do it. But this time [with the pandemic], we had the activists and the will to do it".

(IR21 – BSP)

The emergency circumstances laid the terrain for bringing to life a project that had long been discussed. This increased the legitimacy of the BSP and encouraged the decision to continue even after the emergency ended.

The outcome of post-emergency *negotiation* was a more prefigurative transformation in DSA organizing and the expansion of the repertoire of action. Let us start with the exploration of the first. Schiller-Merkens (2022) defined prefigurative organizing as "the creation of forms of organizing with which envisioned alternative principles are instantiated in the present" (3). A clear example of this change happened in the Aubervilliers-Pantin BSP's food distribution management. After the emergency phase ended, they moved away from a welfare-centric approach to strengthen people's autonomy and self-organization:

"Given that we were more challenged to involve, there was a practical trick where we didn't have enough people. Therefore, we took on more responsibility for the collections. What we said is, we manage the collections, we bring you the contents of the collections to your place, and you form a collective to organize yourselves. We can support you, but the idea is to reverse the situation... [we took care of] sorting, selection... of removing everything that wasn't good... As for the distribution, [we told beneficiaries:] organize it according to your desires. We, as a political collective, do not have a say. So, we were really about transmitting a self-managing practice, not necessarily to make a political change, but to say you have the ability to organize yourselves. That's it."

(IR13- BSP)

Post-emergency *negotiation* implied activists taking stock of their experience during the lockdown and gauging available resources to determine 1) whether to continue and, if so 2) with which changes in strategies and tactics accounting for the new pandemic phase. Modifying the distribution method, as illustrated in the piece of data above, was part of a process of organizing change necessitated by reduced resources in a post-emergency context. Emphasis on the "challenge to involve" (see the excerpt above) hints to the consequences that the exhaustion of the intense times of lockdown phase had for DSA organizing. Activists had less time and energy to sustain needs response at the same rhythm than before over a the medium-term. Exhaustion drove the shortening of time, resources, and participants for the organizing processes. Simultaneously, changes in DSA organizing were instrumental to the goal of reducing the asymmetry between those providing

assistance and those receiving it, fostering conditions for beneficiaries to autonomously organize themselves. Another illustrative case is that of Brigades confronting with how to organize food collection given the end of the emergency phase. During the lockdown, supermarkets were the sole source for food provisioning through donations. However, in the post-emergency, questions arose on the sustainability of this strategy. Continuing to collect food via supermarket-bought donations perpetuated the very system the BSPs sought to present an alternative to. As a result, many of them started to organize food recoveries from markets that in the meanwhile had re-opened. All these examples provide evidence that, in a post-emergency temporality, prefiguration transitioned from the discursive – as it has been since the call for action on Acta website – to the practical level.

As far as repertoire expansion is concerned, this was strictly related to a *cognitive broadening* dynamic. Forging connections with beneficiaries of aid "opened activists' eyes to a different realm of reality" (Zamponi 2023:14), fostering the development of a deeper knowledge of the social needs of the people they were assisting and, more in general, of the environment in which they acted. This contributed to activists' strategic decision not only to continue their actions but also to expand their repertoire. For example, food cooking sites evolved from meal preparation spots closely linked to a short-term goal (distributing food to the most vulnerable) to regular community kitchens, where community ties could be weaved among people from different walks of life. Help desks offering paperwork help for migrants were set up to address emerging needs; lockdown-specific street patrols to distribute food evolved into street workshops with migrants and kids which included various activities such as reading books in multiple languages, board games, group games and drawing. With regard to this latter, the BSPs identified the reasons for its set up in "the desire to establish other connections with excluded people beyond those defined by the urgency of meeting basic needs such as eating" (Facebook page "Brigades de Solidarité Populaire", 9/04/2023). The transition away from an emergency-driven approach and the aspiration to foster enduring, stable connections with the local community were at the undergird of the mechanism of *renovation*.

Ties transformation

The sedimentation of online activism paved the way for Nous Toutes' *ties transformation*. This emerged via a dynamic of *ties building.* The organization's shift online enabled the virtual space to function as an access channel to the movement. This spurred recruitment but also an intensification of exchanges between activists and previously non-activists.

In the case of the BSPs, the mechanism of *ties transformation* built upon the previously described negotiation dynamic. This latter indeed implied assessing the resources generated through collective

action up to that point to determine the way forward. Being active in an emergency context had produced emotional and relational resources among the BSP members and among different BSPs themselves. In terms of relational resources, *ties* were *strengthened* at intra-BSP level, at inter BSPs level (*networking*) and *built* among activists and beneficiaries. I already addressed this latter dynamic in the concluding part of the above paragraph, shedding light on how *ties building* fostered *cognitive broadening*, crucial for innovating the BSPs' repertoire in post-emergency times. Let us delve now into the dynamics of ties transformation within and between BSPs. Like in the trajectory of Interpro, one constitutive element in *ties transformation* dynamic was the strengthening of bonds among group members, forged through their shared experiences of activism amidst challenging circumstances. At the same time, bonds were also fostered at inter-BSP level, substantiating in the building of a *network* reconnecting the various local BSPs that during the emergency had acted as autonomous territorial cells:

"In today's context, what unites us are the trials we have overcome together, our history, and our local grounding […] today, we have stronger ties with other collectives, and among us BSPs there are more connections. Now, we are much more linked to Aubervilliers-Pantin, and we do many more things together, like participating in demonstrations. If there's a soup kitchen for example in aid to Sudan, certain members of our BSP go to help with cooking. Another collective is organizing a dinner, a lunch for the Kurds, or for the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, and we cook to help refugees and survivors of the earthquake. Whoever can participates, also on behalf of BSP, so even certain people from Paris Sud or from Aubervilliers lend us a hand."

(IR21 – BSP)

Despite originating from the antifascist and autonomist circles, what tightened the group together in the early lockdown period was the shared urgency to take action. However, in the post-emergency phase, the binding force for identity shifted toward the history of the BSP and the friendships forged within it. Moreover, the passage above attests to BSPs' understanding of themselves as extending beyond the territorial boundaries of the neighbourhood in which they originated and operated during the lockdown. Lockdown conditions and related restrictions on movement favoured indeed more proximate forms of organization and identification at local level. In contrast, the post-emergency period prompted a shift in focus, stimulating BSPs' own recognition as territorial nodes within the same network.

Identity shift

Building ties with a diverse range of people with different perspectives, expertise and skills embarked the Nous Toutes Paris North on an *identity shift* path, ultimately leading to a radicalization of its positions. A first element of this mechanism resided indeed in *cognitive broadening*. *Cognitive broadening* indicates the expansion of normal ways of thinking by the

cognitive connection of previously unconnected subjects. This expansion of the cognitive horizons occurred as the committee engaged with a broader audience through social media activism. The increased online presence made it more likely to receive content-related feedbacks and solicitations, which influenced it to open towards more intersectionality. This was indeed a departure from the traditional feminist identity of the national movement, making the Paris North local committee a pioneer in this shift:

"We actually opened ourselves up to these topics. We opened up, especially in terms of collective awareness. Beyond VSS (sexual violence and harassment) and violence against women and children, we delved into gender issues, intersectionality, and racism as well […] In 2020, we served as a kind of intersectional advocate for Nous Toutes. The National level had a very traditional discourse at that time, although it changed later on […] When the Black Lives Matter movement gained momentum, I took on the topic, I posted a lot of content about being an ally and collaborated with community organizations to amplify marginalized voices. We were deeply engaged in these issues throughout 2020. Additionally, as a collective, we participated in Black Lives Matter protests and made our stance known. So, in a way, we anticipated the shift towards intersectionality that Nous Toutes experienced from the end of 2021 and throughout 2022".

(IR16-Nous Toutes, Paris North)

The interview data reflect how the selection of the topics to address depended on which activists were running the committee's social media accounts at that time. For example, having a past as an antiracist activist, the coordinator of Nous Toutes immediately took on action when Black Lives Matter mobilisations started developing. Despite remaining strongly focused on gender topics, contents were greatly impacted by the unfolding events.

A second generating sub-mechanism of identity shift was *attribution of opportunity.* Under emergency circumstances, the interconnections among structural grievances became all the more apparent. For Nous Toutes, this led to a reflection on the links between gender and labour exploitation translating into the anticapitalistic transition of the local committee of Paris North:

"Nous Toutes was not very concerned with economic topics. We were talking about pay equality and similar matters, but not really delving into the nitty-gritty. However, the analysis of the pandemic and the idea that, in reality, women are the ones holding everything together—society, the economy, and the family—and yet they are not adequately rewarded or valued on either side, was an eye-opener. We realized that this needed to change. As a result, we saw more interest in these subjects and an increase in related content […] so while we took the step towards intersectionality in 2020-2021, in 2021-2022, we also embraced a more revolutionary and anticapitalistic feminist perspective".

(IR16-Nous Toutes, Paris North)

The idea of Covid as an "eye opener" resonates with existing consensus on the relevance of cognitive activities in times of emergency and crisis - for example, as in the case of the anti-austerity protests (Della Porta 2015). This is due to the increasing perception that existing paradigms are no longer sufficient to understand a rapidly changing situation. In particular, emergency times shed light on the connections among struggles. However, the decision to

appropriate the context as a context of interlinked grievances in the organization's discourse was dependent upon agent-centric mechanisms. On the one hand, a cognitive assessment of procedural injustice (Snow 2013), substantiating the above described mechanism *cognitive broadening*. On the other hand, a strategic calculation concerning the opportunity to proceed in that direction. The activist's statement, noting "more interest in the subject and an increase in related contents," suggests that Nous Toutes envisaged the potentially positive outcomes of riding an ongoing wave - i.e., it attributed the opportunity to the context. These reflections drove it to embrace more anti-capitalist position. Nous Toutes' identity shift thus manifested hence as radicalization.

In the case of the BSPs, *identity shift* gained salience in the post-emergency trajectory of the BSPs out of a resource depletion dynamic. Alimi and Bosi (2015) conceptualised *resource depletion* as an environmental sub-mechanism defined as the "decrease in the capacity of people to engage in contention" (289). Its activation dates back to the end of the emergency, roughly corresponding to the transition between the end of the first lockdown and the softer second lockdown. Over this period, the Brigades were affected demobilization due to the return to the "normal life". Engagement in DSA hence decreased for then stabilising in the medium-run around a core group of activists. Notably, this 'core group of activists' predominantly consisted of individuals with a longstanding background in radical left activism. As a result, the BSPs started perceiving themselves as more markedly 'radical' than before – when a constituency consisting of activists and volunteers favoured more hybrid positions. A tactical consequence of this was the adoption of forms of action with a higher risk of repression. For instance, the Montreuil BSP gradually adopted a confrontational approach in its food collection initiatives. In January 2021, it staged a product requisition at a Carrefour store to protest the growing profits of major retailers amid escalating poverty. This decision plunged activists into months of trials and legal expenses, necessitating a firm commitment to radical political stances.

Bridging

The last mechanism marking Nous Toutes and BSPs trajectories was *bridging*. In both cases, it took place via *networking* and *rooting*. Like Interpro case, for Nous Toutes, networking and rooting was only indirectly linked to the pandemic. It indeed followed the post-emergency change in collective identity. In particular, the radicalisation of the actor steered the direction toward network formation with other radical collective actors active on feminist issues, notably the *Assemblée feministe Paris-Banlieu* and *Féministes Révolutionnaires*. Moreover, the committee also rooted at local level,

starting as of 2022 to hold its meetings at the local headquarter of the CGT trade union in the 18th neighbourhood. This choice led them to create networks with trade unions battles, a shift which further signalled their anticapitalistic transition. For the BSPs, *bridging* was part of the post-emergency internal discussions on how to re-signify action effectiveness to boost means-goals sticking. In particular, BSPs embedded in the neighbourhood movement fabric by networking with several other territorial struggles. For example, they entered the network of housing occupations and the foyers of undocumented migrants as allies, or, in the case of the BSP of Aubervilliers-Pantin, they struggled along local groups for the defence of the JAD, *Jardins à defendre* ("Gardens to defend"), occupied gardens in Aubervilliers threatened by the construction of a solarium for the 2024 Olympic games in Paris.

Table 12. Post-emergency changes of Nous Toutes and the Brigades of Popular Solidarity

	Changes at symbolic level	*Changes at organizational level*			
Collective actor	**Collective identity**	**Strategy**	**Repertoire of action**	**Focus of action**	**Organization**
Nous Toutes	Feminism → intersectional feminism → anti-capitalist feminism (Radicalisation)	Offline actions in the streets are completed by the construction of a contentious online space	Introduction of social media activism via Instagram	Pluralised. From a single focus on gender to a gender-sensitive outlook on social justice and climate issues.	Creation of a Discord group for internal organization purposes; creation of the website; networking with other radical collective groups both related and non-related to gender issues (Extinction Rebellion, CGT Trade Union)
Brigades of Popular Solidarity	Radicalisation	Continuity	Pluralised. From food distribution to permanent solidarity kitchens; set up of legal and migrants desks, Italian language courses, street workshops.	Continuity	Networking and rooting at local level by embedding within the territorial social movement milieu and its specific struggles (e.g. housing occupations,). Enhancement of prefiguration in DSA organizing processes.

7.4 Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Droit au logement (DAL)

The third type of organization includes Extinction Rebellion and *Droit au lodgement*. As shown in Table 13, these cases were marked by a different pattern sustaining the post-emergency transformation process. On the one hand, Extinction Rebellion featured adjustments, sedimentation and encapsulation; on the other, DAL was marked by adjustment and re-equilibration. Despite their different trajectories, these cases were characterized by very similar sub-mechanisms. In particular, they showed a shift at cognitive level from *attribution of opportunity* to *attribution of threat* as the temporality shifted from emergency to post-emergency times. In other words, on the short term, they saw the emergency context as providing heightened opportunities for the attainment of their respective goals. However, the restoring of normalcy was in both cases interpreted as an opportunity closing. Interestingly, this same context interpretation triggered two different mechanisms related to the changes occurred during the emergency: their sedimentation in the case of XR; their dismantling (via re-equilibration) in the case of DAL. At the end of the section, Table 13 sums up the main dimensions of their change. At a glance, it can be observed that, differently from the other cases, XR and DAL were also similarly characterized by far a greater cross-dimensional continuity compared to pre-emergency times. To understand why this is the case, I now turn to the mechanisms underpinning the pathway of change of each case (Table 14).

Table 13. Pathway of change of XR and DAL by mechanisms and sub-mechanisms

Collective actor	*Mechanisms and sub-mechanisms*		
Extinction Rebellion (XR)	**Adjustments** Attribution of opportunity; Negotiation	**Sedimentation** Energization	**Encapsulation** Attribution of threat; De-energization; Resource depletion.
Droit au lodgement (DAL)	**Adjustments** Attribution of opportunity; Networking	**Re-equilibration** Attribution of threat; De-legitimization	

Adjustments

The first mechanism in the pathway of change of Extinction Rebellion and DAL was *adjustments.* In the case of XR, the main adjustment occurred during the emergency phase of the pandemic and consisted in an internal reorganization with the tune-up of the Self-Organizing System called "SAO" (*Système d'auto-Organisation*). In the case of DAL, the main adjustment – along with the several repertoire modifications to comply with restrictions (see Chapter 5) – consisted in the formation of alliances with other grassroots actors and the resulting establishment of a new inter-

organizational collective, “Collective Requisition”, geared to exert pressure on government on the application of the requisition law[63]. In both case, *adjustments* occurred first and foremost by a dynamic of *attribution of opportunity* which made perceive the lockdown context as propitious for boosting movement claims’ resonance. For XR Paris North, *attribution of opportunity* had different nuances. First, opportunities lied in the possibility of having more time to dedicate to internal management issues that had been pending until then. Interviewees indeed reported a sense of fatigue before the pandemic outbreak due to the fact that increases in rebels – dating back to around October 2019, following the success of Chatelet action (See Chapter 5) - hadn't been balanced with a more diffused power distribution at group-level. This had resulted in an heavy workload for only a few individuals. In this sense, XR Paris North leveraged the lockdown-induced pause in civil disobedience actions to refine its organizational model:

“We took this 'time out,' to set it up, which we might have had trouble doing if we had continued with normal life offline. So, there were things to do that “aren't fun”... that we had put in standby, so [with lockdown] there we go, we'll do it”.

(IR9 – XR Paris North)

Emergency-driven routine disruptions allowed for the allocation of time and energies - that in normal times would have been devoted to action organization - towards “unfunny” organizational matters. Therefore, Covid-19 provided the contextual conditions for SAO’s set-up, as it had been sketched, still at an embryonic stage, after Chatelet[64]. One every two online meetings during the lockdown were devoted to crafting an internal constitution, with the delineation of a set of standard practices for communicating, organising and deciding at group-level.

The second way *attribution of opportunity* worked was by confirming XR’s pre-pandemic diagnoses. Interview data reveal that there was a widespread sense of possibility before the pandemic, both in terms of discourse and opportunity for goal attainment. The burgeoning crowds taking the streets for climate protests in 2018 and 2019 had indeed created a feeling of hope and possibility. It was believed that this momentum would increase even more during the pandemic. Like Nous Toutes, XR also saw the health emergency as highlighting long-standing structural issues it had been denouncing for years (“we saw it [Covid] coming”- IR12, Extinction Rebellion). The confirmation of prior diagnoses was particularly sound for environmental militants, who understood

[63] With “Requisition Law”, DAL refers to the ELAN law of November 2018, which allowed for the requisition of empty housing for emergency accommodation for homeless individuals.

[64] The decision of structuring themselves via SAO, in English SOS (System of Self-organizing) follows the organizational model established by XR UK founders in 2019. The idea was to have a self-organizing approach which could safeguard autonomy and mitigate the concentration of power. For more details, see https://extinctionrebellion.uk/act-now/resources/sos/

State's reaction to the health emergency as a tangible manifestation of long-discussed and diagnosed collapse:

"The collapse is a situation in which the State is no longer able to simultaneously oversee through democratic means all basic services, meaning it cannot manage and ensure education, healthcare, security, and food without making compromises. For us, the lockdown was that. We cannot continue to work and live like that without putting our health at risk. It's a very concrete example of collapse"

(IR9 – Extinction Rebellion Paris)

The accuracy of these diagnoses bolstered XR's confidence and fostered great expectations concerning the post-Covid world. The way *attribution of opportunities* worked was through the imagination of a radically different post-emergency future. Amidst uncertainty, ongoing events showcased the viability of change, fuelling a sense of potential and trust within the movement:

"I thought it could create a moment of rupture in society. I believed we could show that we could change. I thought the pandemic showed that the government could stop everything, that we could change society, all it took was a will to stop the system. There was a way to act on the system… [we thought that] what was going to happen was huge and that we could create an awareness. Anyway, [we thought that] it would only strengthen this rise that we've felt within the environmental movement for two years. We thought that it would continue. It would create something, an influx of people who would join us".

(IR18– Extinction Rebellion Paris)

Hopes of system change were rooted in unprecedented State reaction, especially the adoption of lockdown policies, which offered a window onto the existence of room of manoeuvre for policy change. Hence, XR envisioned a future where Covid-19 would allow environmental organizations to continue riding the pre-existing legitimacy and wave of public concern over climate change, with the expectation of its further growth. Attribution of opportunity worked closely with *negotiation*. As stated above, for a social movement organization which made of civil disobedience its strategy mark, Covid represented a moment of withdrawal from confrontation. The ensuing strategy contradiction is only apparent though. Activists indeed made sense of it within the premise of the momentum-driven organizing. In grassroots movements realm, the strategy of momentum-driven organizing alternates an effort to capitalise on *the momentum*, that is on the short-term power that eventful protests seek to generate with the ability to sustain the struggle during normal devoid-of-events times. For XR, Covid was not seen as a momentum-generative opportunity but rather as a moment of introspection and reflection giving activists the opportunity to debate and to prepare actions for the post-lockdown:

"Covid sparked significant debates. That's what Covid was for us, a time of internal debates. Should we absolutely disobey the lockdown? At the same time, is the lockdown more or less okay since it's supposed to protect us from the virus, which is still spreading? So, how do we make the most out of this time? What are the priorities? What do we want

to do when it's over? It was a moment of debate, and debating takes time. And when your comrades, who think you're involved in a lot of actions, see you debating, they say, 'Has XR just turned into a tea salon for discussions?' But, come on, give us some time too..."

(I9 –XR Paris North)

XR therefore had to construct a legitimising narrative for its holding back from concrete actions during the lockdown. Framing its decision as in line with the overall movement strategy whereby moments of abeyance and latency (referred to as "tea salons" in the quote above) were crucial to ensure movement continuity overtime (Staggenborg et al., 2005; Taylor, 2000) was instrumental to this aim.

As far as DAL is concerned, Covid-19 emergency was sensed as an opportunity window to accelerate previously unlikely outcomes. The issue of housing became central during the pandemic as the lockdown emphasized the importance of having a home for protection against the virus. As a consequence, homeless, poorly housed people and tenants facing eviction – precisely the people DAL mobilised for – were at a higher risk of contagion. As seen with Nous Toutes and XR, also in this case the inherent nature of Covid-19 multifaceted crisis brought to the forefront several of DAL's long-standing concerns, highlighting the connections between the right to health and the right to housing. In response, DAL's move was to capitalize on these favourable conditions to exert pressure on government, contingently strategizing in order to "exploit weaknesses in the opponent [the State]" (IR20 - DAL). *Adjustments* involved *networking* with new actors, such as food solidarity actors that had popped up during the pandemic, to set up the 'Collective Requisition' aimed at urging the government to requisition empty buildings. Despite remaining for DAL only "humanitarian actors" because "they do give food to people but they do not mobilise them", these organizations became strategic partners in emergency times due to their direct contact with potentially "mobilizable" homeless individuals:

"[…] we [DAL] are not in direct contact with the homeless. In our case, people come to us; we don't go to them […]We thought, instead of just providing food, we could also encourage them to engage in collective action, to start fighting for their rights, to defend their rights, such as the right to housing until rehousing, which is in the law. They have the right to refuse to leave accommodation if they have no other solution. It's things like that, that's the idea. For us, that's what DAL is about, always mobilizing housing's oppressed".

(IR20 - DAL)

Overall, amidst the emergency, DAL networked with actors that would not have been considered allies in normal times, acknowledging their complementary resources in providing an access channel to people on the ground, which was fundamental to galvanize action.

***Sedimentation* (XR)**

As the pandemic progressed, the Self-Organizing System was put to the test, proving its efficacy for internal organizing. This reassured activists about the necessity of a tool they had been wondering about for several months before the pandemic, triggering the decision to adopt it as a permanent element of its organization repertoire, which describes a *sedimentation* mechanism. The successful trial period of SOS had a spill-over emotional effect at group level insofar as it showed the group's capacity to make decisions even amidst uncertainty, subsequently activating the sub-mechanism *energization*:

"And so, that's what gave us confidence because it worked quite well... Very few people had ever experienced participatory democracy, elections without candidates, a leaderless operation, or decision-making integrated into this mode of governance and operation... And we didn't know, well, I had never experienced horizontality before, so we were kind of feeling our way, saying to ourselves: maybe it'll work, let's try, are we in agreement? Okay, let's go in that direction. And well, we weren't wrong, it works, we manage to do a lot of actions, we manage to handle all our new admissions, all our training sessions, we manage to mobilize, we manage to make decisions, we even had to decide whether we would access certain international funds or not... you know, it was running. So actually, it almost motivated us to continue this work of introspection, constantly amending our system, making self-criticisms, proposing enhancements, improvements, and that's how we created more internal mandates […] so the easing of Covid restrictions in Paris Nord and in France in general was an intensification of the structuring work we could do. We also greatly strengthened thematic support groups at that time. It was then that I started to join Civilization and Formation".

(IR9 – Extinction Rebellion Paris)

As in the case of Nous Toutes with the creation of a Discord channel, XR self-organization system provided Paris North group with an organizing structure which survived the mere emergency phase and solidified over the medium-run. Significantly, emergency times provided time to initiate a work of "introspection", echoing the rebel's words mentioned above, enabling the group to pause, discuss and reflect on the necessary internal roles, on "what is suitable for us, what is not, what are we going to do, what are we not going to do" (IR 11- Extinction Rebellion). As post-emergency restrictions were lifted and action resumed, the group continued to refine its structure and complexity, building upon the robust foundations laid during the emergency period.

***Re-equilibration* (DAL)**

After having adjusted its means of action to account for the change in the context, DAL underwent a *re-equilibration* dynamic. With re-equilibration, I refer to failed transformations. Precisely, I use it to indicate that the various changes during the intense emergency period were exceptional, and once that phase was over, actors went back to previous modes of action. In DAL case, re-equilibration took place as the network which grounded the creation 'Collective Requisition' during the lockdown did not sediment in the medium-run. Its development was strongly influenced by the

temporality of the emergency and, thus, constrained within the limits of such an emergency. While the Collective Requisition arose out of the need to pool together scarce resources, it subsequently did not develop as an aim in and of itself. As the pandemic progressed and the temporality of the emergency spiralled into a new normality, indeed, DAL's activists restored previous ways of normal organizing. In particular, re-equilibration took place per effect of *attribution of threat* and *de-legitimization.* Activists saw the political and social context as no longer propitious for their action. This was mostly due to the adoption of a restrictive law, known as law 'Kasbarian-Bergé' criminalizing housing occupations[65]. Hence, restrictions on occupations passed from being driven by health reasons to be imposed for political reasons, as part of a policy backlash on housing. As a consequence, emergency-contingent attainable outcomes were considered no more under reach because government, as time passed by, turned to be less responsive – if not openly hostile – to the needs of the poorly housed. Attribution of threat operated closely with *de-legitimization*. DAL's spokesperson described a change in the overall media discourse surrounding occupations, highlighting the organization's struggle to present a counter-frame:

"Squatting had a good image before, it was very popular because we occupied buildings owned by rich landlords with personalities supporting us and all that, but now for different reasons we haven't occupied any buildings recently, and we've been somewhat paralyzed by the proposed law [the law Kasbarian-Bargè] so for these reasons, basically, we couldn't, if you want, produce a counter-discourse... show an alternative image precisely... there have been some squats that have been collective, for refugees, for homeless people and all that, which have been circulating a bit, but it's not what we experienced at other times with DAL where we occupied buildings with all the cameras, the media attention and everything... so we lost that legitimacy".

(IR20 -DAL)

The interviewee suggests that despite no visible changes in the post-emergency times, activists perceived a decline in positive representations of them and of their action. They perceive to be struggling in a climate which is more challenging compared to pre-Covid times. Before the pandemic, activists were accustomed to engaging in media-disruptive, undeclared actions – most notably, non-declared occupations. However, in the post-pandemic period, they reshaped their repertoire with fewer occupations and more declared demonstrations. While health-related rules dictated this change during the pandemic, the post-pandemic shift did not follow Covid legacies per se but a repressive stance towards occupations.

[65] The closure of opportunities manifested notably in the promulgation of an anti-squat law at the end of 2021 and in the media debate surrounding it. The anti-squat law, known as "the Kasbarian-Bergé law" hardened the sanctions against the occupiers of an empty dwelling and it accelerated the eviction of tenants struggling with their payments. The law was interpreted by DAL as a repressive measure representing "a strong backlash of the law protecting the poorly housed". This was all the more true considering that the Covid-19 pandemic had showed the centrality of the right to house as a precondition to the right to health of homeless people.

Encapsulation

The last mechanism characterizing the trajectory of XR was *encapsulation*. The label of encapsulation has been used in social movement scholarship to describe the process by which movement organizations have been pushed into a narrow social environment per effect of repression. This has been the case especially for groups engaged in armed political violence which have been forced to reduce contacts with the external world, enclosing themselves from society (della Porta 1995b; Alimi et al. 2015). In this work, I borrow this concept clearly not in reference to those extreme cases but to indicate the enclosing of an actor within the boundaries of its social environment, including the perimeter of action and network configuration. In the case of XR, a dynamic of encapsulation took place whereby the Paris North local group enclosed itself within its delimited cognitive and structural perimeter of action. Interestingly, encapsulation took place dynamically as the pandemic advanced out of the first harsher lockdown phase. Indeed, with the relaxation of the measures, hopes in change gave way to the awareness that "Covid would represent a violent halt for all the movements" (IR18 – Extinction Rebellion Paris). This fuelled *attribution of threat* as heightened post-Covid future expectations were replaced by a sense of frustration and disillusionment stemming from the sensation of a closing window for effective climate action. In the post-emergency temporality, prospects turned bleak:

> "[before the pandemic and even during the lockdown] we had the impression that we were in a catastrophe that was unfolding, but that we could act. Today, we are no longer acting against the catastrophe; we are acting to limit the effects of the catastrophe […] Covid may have also created a sadness that, after the pandemic, led to a sense of heaviness in society making it heavier to struggle…[it is heavier to fight] in sadness than to fight when we say "wow, yay! it's my moment!" in 2019 we were fighting for a collapse to come, in 2023, we are struggling in a collapse that is currently happening, so it's no longer the same thing."
>
> (IR12 – XR Paris North Rebellion)

XR Paris North activists experienced a shift from apocalyptic to post-apocalyptic visions from the emergency to the post-emergency phase of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, activists struggled against a looming but, conditional on appropriate action, still avoidable apocalypse. However, post-lockdown policy interventions made it clear that there would be no considerable change. This signalled a shift away from hopeful visions to one where the environmental breakdown was perceived to be ongoing or inescapable (Cassegård and Thörn 2018; de Moor 2021; Cassegård 2023). Paradoxically, the pandemic period showed both the feasibility of change and, simultaneously, the lack of political will to move in that direction. As suggested by the quote above, these dynamics had an effect at emotional level by increasing the grip of feelings of sadness and powerlessness, yielding the emotional sub-mechanism of *de-energization*. While hope and images

of a positive future have been widely stressed as central in motivating activism in general (Aminzade and McAdam 2001; Jasper 2011; Cook 2018), several studies have stressed their particular importance in environmental activism (Lueck 2007; Ojala 2011). Since the post-war era, environmentalists have precisely acted upon the hope that doom can be averted[66] (Cassegård and Thörn 2022). The sensation of possibilities of change, hence, was seen as a prerequisite for hope to exist. It follows that the post-health emergency vanishing of that sense of possibility led to feelings of frustration, hopelessness and resignation, what I referred to as *de-energization*. At the same time, de-energization triggered *resource depletion*. The group witnessed indeed a notable decline in participation rates from both longstanding militants (referred to as "the veterans" by an interviewee) and unengaged individuals (namely potential new recruits), trends that struggled to recover even as restrictions were eased[67]. This contributed to encapsulation as XR became an intra-movement affair, shifting from being a citizens' movement to a specialists' issue. Forced to put on hold overt protests, for XR the lockdown phase was not a momentum-generative opportunity for action. Rather, as brought to light above, it was a period of latency, internal debates and abeyance. Essentially, it served as a time to engage in discussions and to prepare actions for the post-lockdown. However, even when this temporality finally came to an end, restrictions on gatherings persisted. The main consequence of this was that XR could not openly advocate for participation in civil disobedience actions on its social media platforms. This constrained the opportunity for regular citizens to join XR, prompting the transformation of the movement organization into a more monolithic actor. In this sense, *encapsulation* points to XR's narrowing down to a field of specialized militants already within XR network. In the period before the pandemic, XR had gained momentum as climate change became increasingly prominent on the public and political agenda. In that context of high public resonance of the movement and of its claims, individuals who were not traditionally activists joined the movement simply because "there was something going on, so I will go" (IR18 –

[66] This has changed very recently with the growth of post-apocalyptic environmentalism. For a discussion on the role of emotions into this seemingly hopeless and fatalist environmentalism see Cassegrad 2023.

[67] Three primary factors contributed to this phenomenon. Firstly, there was a heightened opportunity cost associated with mobilization. In May 2020, despite easing restrictions in France, the constrained right to public gatherings posed legal risks that discouraged participation. Secondly, Covid-19 disrupted individuals' lives, limiting their ability to participate in movements due to a lack of biographical availability (McAdam, 1986). As emphasized by an XR militant, "I think that, except for extremely rare and significant times of social struggle, to have the space to engage in activism in life, your life should not be a construction site. Otherwise, you're in survival mode, and when you're in survival mode, you can't do it" (IR2- Extinction Rebellion). Covid-19 exacerbated grievances, intensifying individuals' survival mode and diminishing their capacity to engage. Thirdly, the pandemic prompted a shift in forms of environmental activism, from overt struggle to less public actions. By allowing time for individual reflection, it accelerated certain life changes that led long-standing rebels to withdraw from overt struggle and embrace latent forms of activism. Many XR activists, for example, sought a secluded life in the countryside, with Covid-19 serving as a final catalyst for this inclination. While more focused evidence on this is surely needed, my interviews suggest that the post-Covid frustration resulting from government's failure did not lead activists to direct their energy towards intensified movement outrage over the lost opportunity for systemic change. Instead, many opted for lifestyle activism or what De Moor aptly termed "do-it-yourself activism" (2021).

Extinction Rebellion), thereby transforming XR into a "mass movement with widespread participation and broad appeal" (ibidem). However, the health emergency broke XR pre-pandemic momentum. It increased the opportunity-cost of confrontation and transformed hopes for change into resignation and sadness, which eventually contributed to the movement's downsizing. A case in point of this dynamic is represented by "Our needs", the first XR post-lockdown action, held on 30th May 2020. The action involved staging a sit-in at the Champs-Élysées to protest against a "vertical and blind power" which was about to initiate the post-Covid recovery while leaving the existing structures of economic and political domination untouched. As opposed to them, activists voiced the real needs from which post-Covid regeneration should have started from. This is how a militant remembered that day:

"[…] everyone arrived with their little placard, and we were supposed to block, which was absurd... We were not nearly enough. We were 150, you see. And we had to block a part of the Champs-Élysées. Obviously, it didn't last 30 seconds because it's a highly monitored place, and with 150, it's not enough. It's very few to block the Champs-Élysées. It's very, very few. You would need a thousand. Really very few. Because as a result, there were a lot of cops […]. They kettled everyone..so the pandemic broke a momentum. It didn't destroy a movement, but what was gaining traction, and this is true for XR as well as other movements, well, it messed up the climate protests where there were a million people in France before, and now there are ten thousand." up climate protests where there were million people in France before, and now [in 2023] there are ten thousand".

(IR18 – Extinction Rebellion)

Despite the potential to incite public outrage and reinvigorate confrontational action, the pandemic was perceived as having diminished the pre-existing sense of urgency surrounding the climate crisis and overall societal eventfulness (della Porta, 2020).

Table 14. Post-emergency changes of Extinction Rebellion and Droit au logement

	Changes at symbolic level	*Changes at organizational level*			
Collective actor	**Collective identity**	**Strategy**	**Repertoire of action**	**Focus of action**	**Organization**
Extinction Rebellion	Continuity	Continuity	Continuity	Continuity	Sedimentation of the internal self-organization system (SAO)
Droit au lodgement	Continuity	Continuity	Constrained. Fewer occupations and in general fewer confrontational, media-worthy actions	Continuity	Continuity

7.5 Conclusions

Table 15. Movement groups' pathways of change in Paris after Covid-19 emergency

Collective actor	*Mechanisms and sub-mechanisms*				
Yellow Vests	**Boundary Activation** Negotiation; Cleavages	**Ties transformation** Ties weakening	**Identity shift** Depoliticization	**Bridging** Networking; Rooting.	
Interpro	**Boundary Activation** Negotiation; Cleavages	**Ties transformation** Ties weakening; Ties strengthening; Threat attribution	**Identity shift** Radicalization	**Bridging** Networking; Rooting.	
Nous Toutes (NT)	**Adjustment** Attribution of opportunity; Contention capacity enhancement.	**Sedimentation** Resource Enhancement; Legitimization.	**Ties transformation** Ties building	**Identity shift** Attribution of opportunity; Cognitive broadening.	**Bridging** Networking; Rooting.
Popular Solidarity Brigades (BSP)	**Adjustment** Attribution of opportunity; Contention capacity enhancement.	**Renovation** Negotiation; Legitimization; Cognitive broadening	**Ties transformation** Ties building; Networking.	**Identity shift** Resource depletion. Ties strengthening;	**Bridging** Networking; Rooting.
Extinction Rebellion (XR)	**Adjustments** Attribution of opportunity; Negotiation	**Sedimentation** Energization	**Encapsulation** Attribution of threat; De-energization; Resource depletion.		
Droit au lodgement (DAL)	**Adjustments** Attribution of opportunity; Networking		**Re-equilibration** Attribution of threat; De-legitimization		

This chapter looked at the process of movement group transformation after Covid-19 pandemic in the city of Paris, on the basis of six progressive social movement organizations. Specifically, it aimed at carving out the trajectories of change via a mechanism-centred perspective by detecting the environmental, relational, cognitive and affective dynamics which sustained the process of change. As a caveat, I reiterate that this fourfold division was deductively derived starting from McAdam et al. (2001). It follows that I used it as a compass for analysis, not necessarily expecting each of these four types of mechanisms to have played a significant role in all trajectories of change. Additionally, the chapter aimed also at shedding light on the sites of change, meaning the dimensions where the operation of mechanisms generated evidence of post-emergency transformation. Three overarching results stand out. First, looking at a glance Table 15 – which sums up actors' pathways – it emerges that the process of transformation has been heterogeneous

for the actors under consideration. Despite indeed referring to a generic "process of change", it manifested into different patterns varying per mechanisms and their sequences. Second, even when the same mechanisms and their sequences were present, they gave way to different types of change due to their being generated by distinct sub-mechanisms. This attests to the importance of diverse pre-pandemic conditions in mediating the medium-term impact of Covid-19 emergency. Third, irrespective of the pattern in which it unfolded, the process of movement group transformation led to changes both at symbolic and organizational level. Below, I substantiate these observations by summarizing the main evidence emerging from the cross-case analysis.

Overall, I have identified three types of organizations, differing per the concatenation of mechanisms sustaining the process of change and per the types of changes they led to. The first pattern of transformation marked the trajectories of the Yellow Vests of Montreuil and the Interprofessional collective of the 18th district. It was characterized by the concatenation of the mechanisms *boundary activation*, *ties transformation*, *identity shift* and *bridging*. For both actors, the abrupt onset of the emergency ignited internal divisions regarding the suitable group response, which reflected internal conflicts dating back to before the pandemic itself (*boundary activation*). They eventually led to the withdrawal of a part of the group, triggering a transformation of ties among members. *Ties transformation* took place first and foremost via a *ties weakening* dynamic in both cases. However, in the case of Interpro, *ties strengthening* also occurred. The reinforcement of social relations among those who shared the same political background and remained active during the pandemic (sharing, hence, the emotional experience of bearing the costs of mobilising in an unfavourable context) brought about radicalisation, with the creation of a new collective subject, *18eme en lutte*. In the case of the Yellow Vests, the only way *ties transformation* worked was through the fragmentation of the existing bonds. Indeed, the resistance among the remainders to Covid-related opportunity to redefine identity boundaries resulted in the group's ultimate de-politicisation.
The second type of pathway includes Nous Toutes Paris North and the Brigades. It was characterized by *adjustments*, *ties transformation*, *identity shift* and *bridging*. The only different mechanism attests to the degree of influence of the pandemic in their trajectories of change: *sedimentation* in the case of Nous Toutes and *renovation* in the case of the BSP. In the former case, short-term adjustments made to adapt to the emergency context, namely establishing a Discord channel for online group organization and engaging in social media activism, crystallized in the post-emergency temporality and became permanently part of the actor's repertoire and organizational practices. In the case of the BSPs, direct social action not only sedimented but continued transforming actors' repertoire, leading to a pluralisation of the forms of action in the

post-emergency temporality. The stabilisation of changes in the medium-run led to *ties transformation* via the common sub-mechanism of *ties building*. Nous Toutes connected with a broader audience through online exposure, while the BSPs forged connections with aid recipients. *Ties transformation* was accompanied by an expansion of the cognitive horizons in both cases. However, while in the case of Nous Toutes *cognitive broadening* activated *identity shift*, in the BSP case it catalysed (repertoire) *renovation*, prompting activists to recognize the broader spectrum of people's needs beyond mere sustenance. This is particularly interesting for understanding the dynamics of change. First, it demonstrates that the same sub-mechanism can be generative of different mechanisms. Second, despite both actors underwent *identity shift* with an ensuing radicalization of their collective identity, this resulted out of different sub-mechanisms. In the case of Nous Toutes, it emerged from an expansion of cognitive horizons towards anticapitalistic stances and perceived opportunities; for the BSPs, it owed to *resource depletion*, due to volunteers withdrawal, and to the tightening of ties among a core group of remainders, mainly people with a background in the radical left and post-autonomist movements. It is noteworthy, also, that post-emergency collective identity remaking was influenced by varying relational dynamic. For Nous Toutes, establishing connections with a wider audience was pivotal, as it allowed the organization to expand its cognitive boundaries, marking a significant step towards radicalization. For the BSP, it was the fragmentation of internal ties – due to withdrawal – and their parallel strengthening among those who remained to have salience for subsequent collective identity transformation.

The third type of organization distinguished DAL and Extinction Rebellion. These cases do not share any mechanism except for emergency-related adjustments. However, they have been discussed together because they have changed the least compared to the pre-pandemic period. Additionally, they both underwent a shift from *attribution of opportunities* to *attribution of threats* in conjunction with the transition to the post-emergency temporality. XR stabilised lockdown-bounded changes in its internal structuring model. Moreover, the aftermath of the emergency was accompanied by the sense of closing of a window of opportunity for societal change. This, along with the de-mobilisation of long-standing activists (*resource depletion*) and the spread of a sense of frustration and hopelessness (*de-energization*) activated *encapsulation*. The same dynamic of opportunity closure was experienced by DAL, albeit generating a different mechanism. The perception of diminishing opportunities to achieve housing outcomes prompted *re-equilibration*, resulting in the dismantling of changes implemented during the uncertain emergency period, when sudden opportunities had arisen.

There are further comparative insights that emerge from the analysis. The pathways of actors that show a higher degree of change share some specific mechanisms and sequences. These include the transformation of group ties, a shift in identity and the bridging of actors' social environments. These three mechanisms occurred in pattern in the first and the second type of trajectories identified above and led to significant changes both at the level of collective identity and organizing. With regard to the collective identity, this radicalised in the cases of Nous Toutes, Interpro and the BPS while it depoliticized for the Yellow Vests. As for the organization, the main cross-cutting change was a territorialisation of organizations' action. Nous Toutes, Interpro, Yellow Vests and the BSPs trajectories were commonly marked by *bridging* and, interestingly, in all those cases it was constituted by the same sub-mechanisms: rooting and networking. Definitely, the rooting of actors' action at local level and an expansion of their networks was a common instance of post-pandemic change. Despite this similarity in mechanisms and outcomes, the analytical regression at the level of sub-mechanisms has allowed to appreciate the case-specific dynamics that entered into play in constituting the mechanisms as well as to gauge the different relative role that the pandemic actually played in prompting those changes. For instance, similarity in the collective identity change "radicalisation" in the case of Nous Toutes, Interpro and the BSPs was the outcome of three different stories. In the first case, it resulted out of the combination of a greater visibility online, new ties forged and the broadening of the cognitive horizons – enabled by the emergency, which shed light on the interconnections among struggles. In the second case, it followed the strengthening of ties among radical activists who continued mobilizing amidst the lockdown. In the third case, it followed a participation drop of volunteers and the reduction of constituency to already radically politicised individuals.

Another emerging element is that the nature of *adjustments* made by movement organizations in response to the pandemic played a crucial role in shaping their paths of change. This is evident in the comparison between XR and NT trajectories. These actors' point of departure was quite similar. Both born in 2018 amid the resonance of their respective issues, they both relied on concrete offline actions as the cornerstones of their strategy. Similarly, they were both undergoing a period of significant growth and early decentralisation of their structure before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. When the emergency struck, they utilized the lockdown to create a more solid internal organization, leading to the establishment of long-lasting organizational arrangements (the Discord platform for NT and the SAO for XR) in the medium term. However, while they changed similarly from this point of view, it is remarkable that Nous Toutes experienced more broad-ranging consequences out of it. In that case, adjustments entailed not only organizing via a Discord channel

but also a repertoire expansion with Instagram activism. Both adjustments facilitated a surge in group participation which fuelled, with a cascading effect, *ties transformation* and *cognitive renovation*, yielding an overall *bridging* of the actor outside of its established structural and cognitive perimeter of action - which, in turn, laid the ground to the radical remaking of its collective identity. In this case, the sedimentation of short-term changes in organization led to a medium-term transformation in identity. On the contrary, in the case of XR, adjustments in organization were accompanied by the experience of a phase of latency marked by *resource depletion*, resulting in a dropping participation. The actor enclosed within its boundaries (*encapsulation*), making itself less permeable to deeper changes. There, hence, the main transformation remained confined to the organizational dimension[68]. Despite sharing antecedent conditions and being commonly exposed to the same juncture, the contingent decision of Nous Toutes of adjusting both its repertoire and its organizational model set it on a trajectory of more far-reaching changes.

Another crucial finding is the significance of antecedent conditions in shaping the medium-term impact of an emergency. Some changes were accelerated by the emergency. These are changes that were already *in nuce* before the pandemic, in respect to which the pandemic served merely as an accelerator. Examples include the creation of SAO in XR case or the depoliticization of the Yellow Vests, that exacerbated an already ongoing quest for a new collective identity. Other changes were enabled by the pandemic, meaning they were set in motion by the emergency - without it, they would have been less likely. These are for example the mounting up of the Discord platform in the case of Nous Toutes or the creation of *18eme en lutte* out of the ashes of Interpro. However, it is important to note a caveat regarding the notion of a complete change from scratch. Even those changes 'enabled' by the pandemic resulted from the synergy between contingent opportunities and path dependence dynamics. For instance, the Covid pandemic alone would not have been sufficient to enable the creation of a Discord platform without the presence of a core group of activists who had solidified around pre-pandemic actions and continued their activities online during the lockdown. Similarly, emergency-enabled formation of *18e en lutte* was made possible due to the presence of a group of individuals within Intepro who came from the same radical circles and had already established a capital of social relations.

[68] It should be mentioned that this might also be linked to XR being a transnational movement, born in 2019 in France on the wake of its English counterpart which had a slight longer history. XR hence had a more solid and rigid identity framework agreed on at transnational level, which was less permeable to change. The same applies to DAL, which showed continuity in terms of collective identity because it was an historical collective actor within the French social movement scene. Its identity had been shaped by twenty years of struggles for housing rights and was less likely to be renegotiated even amidst emergency times.

Overall, evidence confirms the hypothesized needed revision of the interpretation of the pandemic as a critical juncture. In all cases analysed, the pandemic and the structural problems it shed light on have been made sense of as in line with movements' pre-existing diagnoses. In a nutshell, it did not reveal anything new for activists. At the same time, this raises the question of whether it boosted progressive actors' claims resonance, ultimately amplifying the prospects for social change. Results hint to a varying impact according to the movement organization and the sector of mobilization. This is all the more visible in the contrasting cases of Nous Toutes and Extinction Rebellion. Nous Toutes greatly benefited from the fact that Covid emergency acted as an amplifier of an ongoing discourse. Indeed, the Paris North group promptly exploited the emergency to show the legitimacy of its claims and to accelerate people's awareness-raising on feminist battles through an expansion of its repertoire. For XR activists, instead, the pandemic emergency broke the pre-pandemic movement's momentum. By showing that there was a window of opportunity for system change and that it was not seized by governments, it led to frustration among activists, which, coupled with a decrease in participation, signalled the end of the movement's momentum.

Finally, the analysis attests to the salience of the time dimension inherent in the pandemic unfolding. When gauging the effects of an emergency, consideration should be addressed to the phase of the emergency under scrutiny. Emergencies, indeed, are not monoliths but social constructions shaped by a dynamic sense of time which is likely to evolve over the course of emergency itself. Movement organizations processual changes analysed in this chapter showed precisely that contingent decisions – on whether to sediment or not adjustments, for example - were taken according to temporality-driven sets of opportunities, challenges and resources.

CHAPTER 8

Comparing pathways of change and conclusions

8.1 Introduction

This final chapter of the dissertation discusses the findings of the empirical analysis. First, pathways and mechanisms of change are compared across the two city cases. In particular, I put forward three typologies of processual change found across the Milanese and Parisian empirical material. Second, it draws conclusions on movement groups transformations as a combination between exogenous and endogenous factors, that is, between the pandemic and social movement organizations. As a last dimension of comparison, it expands on the influence of shifting temporalities on the trajectories of transformation. Then, the chapter moves to address the literature contributions and expands on the role of Covid-19 event in shaping trajectories of change. The final section addresses the contributions to the literature, the limitations of this study and suggests pathways for future research.

8.2 Dimensions of change across cases in Paris and Milan

Covid-19 pandemic has variously transformed the landscape of progressive social movement organizations in both Milan and Paris. Some organizations have undergone significant changes after the health emergency period, while others have shown only partial changes. Overall, evidence suggests that post-emergency change was not a one-way pathway. As far as the dimensions of change are concerned, no pattern of change emerged as more closely associated with either the symbolic or the instrumental dimension. Instead, changes in collective identity and in organization were deeply interlinked and tapped the one into the other along the same trajectories. Nevertheless, in both Parisian and Milanese cases we observed that post-emergency changes in collective identity followed changes in organization. Specifically, the mechanism of *identity shift* emerged after either the *sedimentation* or *renovation* of action repertoires adopted during the emergency.

Against this diverse background, it cannot be concluded that all cases in Milan and that all cases in Paris have been characterized by a same trajectories of change. Evidence, in other words, does not suggest the presence of a, so to say, local specificity regarding how actors have changed. Rather, post-emergency transformation manifested as organization-specific, emerging in patterned

sequences of mechanisms according to a synergy between pre-pandemic paths – who actors were, what were their activities and with which resources before the onset of the pandemic – and contingent choices. This hence raises the question of whether cross-cutting 'types of organization', marked by the same patterns of change, can be detected in the empirical material. Before taking it up, it might be useful to take a step back and try to outline some general conclusions for each empirical context.

In Milan, the choice of the form of action with which to respond to the pandemic played a crucial role in steering the dynamic of change amidst the emergency. All social centres under analysis chose to adopt direct social action already since the first lockdown months. This decision embarked them on a very similar trajectory of change (at least in its first stages), marked by an opening of the perimeter of their action to the demands and contaminations of the territory. This dynamic had a major or lesser gravity across actors' trajectories of change according to variation in the set of their initial conditions, yielding varying degrees and forms of change – as explored in depth below. Extinction Rebellion Milan, on the contrary, was a new-born collective group in the urban movement landscape when the pandemic out-broke. While, on the one hand, its forming within a pre-existing transnational movement allowed it to be inserted within a network from which to inherit ideas, constraints and forms of action, the specific Milan group was in its early days and hence poor in material and relational resources to promptly react to a suddenly changed context. As seen in the empirical chapter, this led it to have a longer adjustment period which eventually did not translate into any significant medium-term change. Overall, the major legacies of Covid-19 period in Milan unfolded at symbolic level, and specifically consisted the unmaking and remaking of actors' collective identity, with more substantial changes being evident in the cases of Lambretta and Collective 20092.

In the case of Paris, social movement organizations changed significantly at both symbolic and instrumental level. At symbolic level, i.e. as far as changes in collective identity are concerned, actors have known an overall process of unmaking and remaking of their identities. This has manifested into two main outcomes: radicalisation and depoliticization. Radicalization was evident in the experiences of Interpro, the BSPs and Nous Toutes, while depoliticization was observed in the Yellow Vests of Montreuil. At instrumental level, the major transformation was a deeper integration of the actors at local level and a widening of their networks. This expansion also led actors to enlarge their specific struggle domains to other areas of contention, mostly related to territorial issues. Notably, this form of change was consistent across all actors that reported changes at the symbolic level, indicating a structured combination in the Parisian sample between shifting

identities and organizational changes. Finally, the least degrees of change marked Extinction Rebellion and *Droit au logement*. Except for a change at organizational level in the case of XR - which fine-tuned its system of internal self-organization during the lockdown - both it and DAL bore a relative continuity compared to their pre-pandemic path. This evidence is likely associated with their high level of organization, with the former being a transnational movement and the latter a formal association. These organizational structures provided them with pre-existing frameworks that were more resilient to changes driven by emergencies.

A final noteworthy aspect is that, in terms of organizational changes, there appears to be a consistent trend towards territorializing action and expanding networks after the emergency across both Milanese and Parisian organizations. However, at the level of identity, Milanese organizations became overall towards more moderate and blurred, whereas, in the Parisian cases, identities became more radical.

8.3 Trajectories of change across cases

Let us now turn to the mechanisms and the pathways of social movement organizations' change in post-emergency times. This dissertation has retraced how actors have changed during the health emergency unfolding, highlighting their pathways and grouping them into relevant 'types of organizations' according to the pattern that sustained their transformation. While some insights for inter-organizations comparison within each city context have already been offered in the empirical chapters, here I ask whether overall trajectories of change *across* empirical contexts can be identified. Which trajectories have actors in Milan and Paris followed for their changes? Which mechanisms have characterized the organizations that have changed the most? Overall, three main pathways of change can be distinguished. Before delving into each of them below, I reiterate that when referring to 'pathways' I do not indicated 'locked' patterns sustaining the process the change. Indeed, the sequential unfolding of their constituting mechanisms may not have been the same in each change trajectory. In fact, the sequence of mechanisms involved in each change trajectory may vary. Therefore, the decision to place an actor in one trajectory rather than another depended not only on the specific manifestation of the pattern, but also on which mechanism had the greatest salience in organizations' processual transformations.

Adjustments → Ties transformation/Bridging → renovation and/or identity shift

The first trajectory of change marked the Parisian cases of Nous Toutes and the BSPs and the Milanese cases of Rimake, Collective 20092 and Lambretta. It is characterized by the following pattern:

Adjustments → **Ties transformation**/**Bridging** → Renovation and/or Identity Shift

The main driver of the process of post-emergency change across all these cases was the actors' engagement with the outside world. That is, actors that have highly changed after the pandemic emergency were those engaging with forms of action that allowed them to broaden their struggles to wider publics. Hence, the catalyst of this trajectory were the social relations forged during the emergency at external level, both between participants and communities of non-participants and between organizations and their surrounding environment. In this respect, what evidence appears to suggest is that actors that transformed the most over the pandemic emergency were those that have been able to either 1) bridge their action by enlarging their environment, including weaving large and transversal connections with the surrounding community through a rooting in their territories 2) to transform their ties by building relationships with a broadened audience, which led them to interact with people outside their established perimeter of participants. In other words, the turning point in this trajectory is represented by the mechanisms *ties transformation* and/or *bridging*. I use the option "and/or" because there were cases in which the two happened in synchrony, one following the other, while others in which they activated disjointly, with *ties transformation* taking place at the beginning of the sequence while *bridging* occurring at later stages, as the end point of the trajectory. Let us illustrate this point with some examples.

In the case of the Milanese social centres, *adjustments* → *ties transformation* → *bridging* formed a patterned sequence, presenting in the same identical order. This was due to the specificity of the adjustments these cases undertook. Adopting direct social action and, specifically, engaging with the distribution of food parcels to individuals in need, forcibly placed these actors in connection with new and wider publics. These latter were constituted primarily by the beneficiaries audience but also but also by all the volunteers who got involved on the wake of both the moral urgency to participate in the collective effort against the virus and the sudden lockdown-driven free time. This dynamic of *ties transformation* combined, in a loop-like generative pattern, with a mechanism of *bridging*. In particular, the characteristics of direct social action under the lockdown in Milan

facilitated the opening to and the anchoring at local level. As the reader may recall from Chapter 5, indeed, the Brigades were born as grassroots initiatives aiming to provide material help to individuals from the surrounding neighbourhood. Also when they entered the more resourceful and formal circuit of the Voluntary Emergency Brigades, they remained territorial nodes within a wider network, maintaining a scope of action focused on the neighbourhood. It follows that by means of DSA, social centres not only built ties with a broader audience (*ties transformation*) but expanded also the boundaries in which their action unfolded[69] (*bridging*).

In contrast, as far as the Parisian cases within this trajectory are concerned, *ties transformation* and *bridging* did not develop in sequence but were mediated by *identity shift*. The patterned sequence hence in these cases is *ties transformation* → *identity shift* →*bridging*. That is, *bridging* was the end point of the trajectories, resulting from an already occurred shift in identity. The reader may wonder why this is the case, especially considering that the BSPs also engaged in direct social action, similar to the Milanese cases we have reviewed so far. Reasons are to be found in the origin of the BSPs in France. These were indeed *ad-hoc* actors born with the specific aim to provide for immediate and urgent needs amidst the emergency. Hence, they did not have a pre-existing social environment to bridge, given their status of newly emerging groups. In their cases, *bridging* occurred after the radicalisation of their identity, with the aim to expand their network, participate in additional struggles and furthering the process of rooting at local level. It followed, in other words, the decision to continue acting in post-emergency times, becoming permanent actors of the Parisian social movement milieu. A similar pattern emerged in the case of Nous Toutes: *bridging* occurred as a result of, and in response to, radicalization. Radicalization indeed entailed embracing anticapitalistic views, which prompted them to connect with a broader range of actors beyond gender-related issues.

Despite these variable geometry relationships among mechanisms, the general path followed by cases within this first trajectory was similar. Via *adjustments*, they connected with a broader audience opening to the surrounding environment. Interestingly, this occurred despite differences in *adjustments*. The social centres in Milan and the BSPs in Paris indeed enlarged their social environments to broadened publics of participants, the former through the concreteness of DSA while the latter, on the contrary, virtualizing its typical street-based activism through social media engagement. In all the cases, this dynamic laid the ground for either *renovation* or *identity shift*, the two usually reinforcing each other. Let us zoom in to delve more in particular into these dynamics.

[1]A notable example in the Milanese sample was represented by RImake, which, having already invested in DSA (Digital Social Innovation) before the pandemic, did not expand its boundaries of action but rather strengthened those already existing.

The greater engagement with the outside granted by adjustments indeed spurred cognitive broadening and/or legitimization. While in my analysis I captured them as sub-mechanisms, it is important to bring them into discussion as they acted as underlying transmission channels between *ties transformation/bridging* and *renovation*. Indeed, both DSA and social media activism expanded actors' knowledge and bolstered their legitimacy. This, in turn, steered the way to either *renovation* or *identity shift*. For instance, in the case of Nous Toutes, *cognitive broadening,* stemming from a greater exposition of actors to intersectional and anti-capitalist discourses, contributed to their radicalization. In the case of the Milanese social centres and the BSPs, direct social action granted legitimacy and allowed them to produce knowledge about the spatial context in which they were placed. This spurred their decision to sediment DSA after the end of the emergency and to expand its practices, activating hence *renovation*. Renovation was followed in both cases by *identity shift*, the latter being driven by different reasons. In the Milanese cases, *renovation* was accompanied by *identity shift*, as transformation in repertoire and organization granted by renovation made identity actors' boundaries more blurred. In the case of the BSP, we can observe likewise the occurrence of *identity shift* yet this was not so much due to a change at organizational level, namely to the decision to renovate the repertoire, but to the participation drop of volunteers and the ensuing remaining of only participants with a militant background. Interestingly, hence, while the social centres in Milan blurred their identity and overall underwent a moderation of their strategy, the BSPs in Paris became more radical. Actors following this trajectory, hence, have highly changed both in identity and in organizational configurations, the two types of change being highly linked.

Boundary activation → ties transformation → identity shift → bridging

The second overall trajectory of post-emergency change was marked by the succession of the following mechanisms:

Boundary activation → **ties transformation** → Identity shift → Bridging

Being the pattern that sustained the process of change of only the Yellow Vests and Interpro, the comparative evidence regarding this trajectory has already been illustrated in Chapter 7, dedicated to Paris. To summarize, *boundary activation* initiated the pathway, coupled with a transformation of ties. How ties transformed worked as a turning point (Sewell 2005) influencing the eventual form of change, which is why *ties transformation* appears in bold in the figure above. While social bonds weakened in both cases - due to a decrease in participation among long-standing members - they strengthened in the only case of Interpro, where a minority of activists chose to remain active

amidst the emergency. The variation in how ties transformed resulted in two different types of *identity shift*, the third mechanism in the sequential unfolding. On the one hand, the Yellow Vests progressed toward a more depoliticized identity; on the other, Interpro dissolved and a new collective group with a markedly more radical identity was created, *18e en lutte*. These dynamics finally interlocked with *bridging*. Actors commonly bridged their social environment by widening their network and rooting at local level. This type of organizational change, however, did not stand in stark contrast with pre-pandemic paths. The Yellow Vests indeed had already, before the pandemic, embarked a strategy shift which entailed investing in a greater rooting in the social movement milieu of Montreuil. Interpro, for its own part, was an issue based actor born in 2019 with the specific aim to organize resistance against the pension reform at neighbourhood level (the 18th district). Being the territorial dimension already marked before the pandemic, *18e en lutte* only furthered the path of its predecessor.

Adjustments → re-equilibration/Encapsulation

The final significant trajectory pertained to those cases where the pandemic had the least enduring impact. These included DAL, Extinction Rebellion Paris North, Extinction Rebellion Milan and Collective Zam. It was characterised by the following sequence:

Adjustments → **Re-equilibration/Encapsulation**

The main driver of this trajectory was *re-equilibration*. Indeed, adjustments made to confront the emergency context did not stabilise and actors 're-equilibrated' to their pre-pandemic conditions. As explored in detail in the chapters, this does not mean that the pandemic did not exert any influence. Simply, this influence was short-lived. This was the case of DAL and ZAM, which implemented significant organizational changes during the emergency. However, these changes did not survive the emergency's end. I included in this type of trajectory also Extinction Rebellion Milan despite its trajectory being characterized not by a mechanism of re-equilibration but by sedimentation. It indeed experienced changes at the internal organizational level as a legacy of the pandemic period. However, unlike the cases examined in the aforementioned trajectories, these changes remained isolated, failing to generate cascading effects on other dimensions. In its case, to strike as crucial was *encapsulation*, whereby the action, previously directed towards society beyond the movement, became more inwardly oriented, primarily engaging the movement's own members.

8.3.1 Antecedent conditions and contingent opportunities

Another crucial aspect of comparison regards the relative weight of antecedent conditions vis-à-vis emergency-related opportunities in explaining meso-level change after an emergency. While contingent choices played a crucial role in shaping the trajectory of change – e.g. the decision to *sediment* or to *renovate* short-term adjustments -, these decisions were influenced by the interpretation of the context as either an opportunity or a threat on the basis of actors' pandemic conditions. In particular, to have made the difference for contingent strategizing was the specific phase the actor was undergoing prior to the emergency. At the same time, I am not suggesting that previous conditions affected deterministically the trajectories of change. For one, similarity in initial conditions did not yield similarity in changes. Unfolding trajectories were indeed porous and permeable to the influence of unexpected emerging resources and shifting opportunities. Without reviewing how the pre-pandemic past played out across all change trajectories analysed, let us discuss just few illustrative examples.

Lambretta, Collective 20092 and the Yellow Vests all began their trajectory from very similar pre-emergency conditions: abeyance, group de-energization, scarcity of relational resources, and, for Lambretta and the Yellow Vests, significant internal fragmentation. The pandemic tapped exactly into these conditions, albeit yielding different outcomes. In the cases of Lambretta and the Yellow Vests, it brought internal tensions to the forefront, triggering *boundary activation* followed by *identity shift*. However, the changes in their identities resulted to be very different according to the 'strategic line' which *contingently* prevailed out of boundary activation. Specifically, in the case of the Yellow Vests, those who saw the emergency context as an occasion to reconstruct the bases for a new collective identification withdrew the group. Conversely, for Lambretta, the front advocating for a seizure of the contingent DSA-related opportunity to enlarge its prior identity and action perimeter prevailed, with all the ensuing medium-term changes that this choice entailed. As far as Collective 20092 is concerned, the decision to make emergency-bounded direct social action permanent was taken precisely because it was interpreted as a way out of a pre-pandemic phase of decline.

Overall, the emergency juncture affected different organizations in different ways. On the one hand, actors starting out from similar pre-pandemic conditions changed differently, following various pathways (i.e. Nous Toutes and XR Paris North). On the other, actors that responded similarly to the pandemic - for example by engaging in direct social action – and that followed the same pathway, reported transformation at the level of the same dimension but differing per forms and extents, that

is, with more or less degrees of continuity compared to their pre-pandemic past, depending on their conditions before the pandemic.

8.3.2 The influence of shifting temporalities

At the outset of this work, I posited that time-related dynamics mattered for the process organizations' transformation. Precisely, I had advanced an hypothesis, suggesting that how actors mobilized in intense times differed from how they mobilized in what I referred to as post-emergency, decelerating times. Evidence confirms my expectation. The analysis indeed showed that the temporality connected with the unfolding of the pandemic affected organizations' process of transformation. In particular, the process of change appeared to be characterized by two phases: an emergency phase and a post-emergency one, each one bearing specific set of challenges and opportunities. Significantly, the emergency phase presented all actors with the dilemma of whether and how to respond to a suddenly changed context. Indeed, for almost the entirety of the cases, it was characterised by the *adjustment* mechanism, resulting out of a dynamic of group negotiation over how to react. Likewise, the post-emergency phase was kicked off by a negotiation dynamic: actors had to decide whether or not to maintain the short-term changes as permanent features of their action. These decisions were taken on the basis of antecedent conditions and the resources that could have emerged or decreased in the meantime. In other words, variation in context from the emergency to the post-emergency led to a reconsideration of what the most effective and legitimate forms of action were. Notably, evidence suggests that it was at this point of the trajectory, namely at the onset of the post-emergency, that antecedent conditions exerted their greater influence. Indeed, during the emergency, the range of agency options was limited due to national restrictions. Hence, actors' own characteristics remained relatively in the background and unusual paths were easily taken in light of what was considered an exceptional parenthesis[70]. Nevertheless, as circumstances gradually returned to normal, these traits emerged as pivotal factors in shaping the path forward. In shifting temporalities, actors reinterpreted which forms of action to adopt resulting in the decision to 1) re-equilibrate adjustments or 2) to sediment (or renovate) actions. Interestingly, even in cases of sedimentation or renovation - which essentially confirmed the strategy pursued during the emergency – actors may have been driven by motivations different from those initially prompting their adoption at the onset of the emergency.

But how did variation across temporalities affect these decisions? At general level, we can say that

[70] For example: the decision of DAL to create a new collective actor to push for the Requisition of vacant buildings or Lambretta taking up a totally new form of action, DSA.

the emergency fostered feelings of disorientation and a sense of fear but spurred also the moral duty to do something. It liberated time, creating a reservoir of people ready to commit while the unprecedented situation fostered hopes for action and, in general, for a more progressive post-Covid world to be possible. In the post-emergency, resources decreased. A sense of fatigue prevailed over the emotional charge of the early days, while prospects of radical changes started to wane. These shifting conditions variously impacted across trajectories, being more relevant for those organizations that practiced direct social action. In those case, shifting temporalities drove the reorganization of DSA provision or, alternatively, its final dismantle.

8.4 A critical juncture for Italian and French progressive movement organizations?

The evidence provided in this work suggests a more cautious approach to critical events' effects for social movements. As demonstrated, the prevailing interpretation of the pandemic as a critical juncture expected to uniformly produce change requires careful assessment within the trajectories of specific movement organizations comprising a social movement. To this regard, there is one last aspect that emerges from the empirical analysis, that is the contraposition between what scholars have understood as an eventful period and the perception of this period from the point of view of the interviewees. In other words, how movement organizations made sense of change. Despite the medium-term changes in their organizations, activists predominantly emphasized that Covid-19 did not represent a breakthrough for progressive agency. Across the empirical sample, evidence suggests that Covid-19 was not interpreted as an event revealing something entirely new. Instead, movement organizations highlighted that Covid-19 underscored the risks, inequalities, and structural problems that they had already been observing and addressing. In essence, it confirmed the pre-pandemic diagnoses. What was truly new, however, was the window of opportunity it created for accelerating change by making the longstanding claims of movements more visible. In particular, data revealed a cross-cutting shift from high hopes for change in emergency times to frustration and disillusion stemming from the waning of those transformative prospects as time passed by. The transition from *attribution of opportunity* to *attribution of threat* was particularly marked for actors belonging to the third trajectory of change above identified. In particular, their re-equilibration was due to the fact that contingent adjustments made on the short term on the wake of heightened perception regarding transformation were no longer necessary on the medium-term, when the window of opportunity for societal change was sensed as having closed down. Interestingly, these perceptions were less pronounced in the cases belonging to the first trajectory of change, where the changes induced by Covid-19 enabled them to open up to the outside world,

rejuvenating from a pre-pandemic phase of decline. Moreover, differences can be detected in how these shifting views characterized Milanese and Parisian cases. In Milan, Covid-19 was interpreted as having shattered a *nascent* movement momentum, while in Paris, it was sensed as having broken *pre-existing* movement momentum. Milanese social movement organizations, indeed, shared high hopes that the severe and deadly consequences of years of privatization policies in the healthcare sector in Lombardy - evident in the dramatic impact of the virus at the regional level - would lead to an unprecedented city-wide urban mobilization. For some of them, these hopes had been particularly heightened during the lockdown, when the grassroots organization of the Brigades had suggested that such a societal change was on the horizon. The Brigades were interpreted indeed as a new collective subject capable of fostering trust in a weakened urban social movement terrain marked by past fractures. They were imagined as having the possibility to act as organizational echo chambers of collective anger. The lack of realization of these prospects in Milan, and overall in Italy, is attributed to the absence of a fertile mobilization terrain on the left, capable of sustaining the politicization of the mismanagement of the crisis in the medium term. In Italy, the pandemic created the illusion that the emergency timeframe could be sufficient to overcome structural conditions unfavourable to mobilization.

In Paris and in France more in general, instead, the pandemic was sensed as having tamed pre-existing social ferment and broke movements' momentum, signalled by the cycle of contention against the pension reform in 2019. This does mean that hopes for a collective awakening on the inequalities and structural problems enlightened by the pandemic did not realize. Rather, activists emphasize the overall climate created by Covid hindered the translation for collective awareness into collective voicing. As summed up by an activist from Intepro (IR1), after Covid, people "needed to take air [making reference to the need to take fresh air and exit homes after home confinement] and have done so".

8.5 Literature contributions and research limitations

This dissertation underlines the importance of contextualising the impact of major exogenous shocks in movement organizations' specific trajectories. The argument I have put forward is that emergencies, such as the one spurred by the spread of Covid-19, *may* have a long-lasting transformative impact for movement organizations. In order to investigate this, I closely looked at organizations' trajectories of change, on the basis of an understanding of change as a combination of endogenous and exogenous factors - that is to say between the pandemic context and movement organizations. I have substantiated this argument with qualitative data from the progressive social movement field of two cities, Milan and Paris.

Overall, this dissertation has made important scholarly contributions. It represents an ambitious endeavour in that it has explored several unchartered realms of knowledge. On the one hand, it departed from existing studies that addressed how actors change in relation to a context change in one point in time. Rather, it adopted an innovative perspective which looked at change as an unfolding process by adopting a longitudinal – yet limited in time – perspective. At the same time, it explored collective actors transformation across dimensions, hence not focusing on a specific site of change. Also, data collection via interviews allowed to have an innovative take on how change is signified by activists, that is *what it does mean to change*, for them. On the other hand, this thesis is among the first works to systematically address the medium-term consequences of the Covid-19 health emergency on progressive movement organization. In short, the question of how social movement organizations change after it has not been posed before. However, the answers to this question do speak to the existing literature.

In general, this work contributes to social movement scholarship in different respects.
First, it inserts in the strand of research on social movements during the pandemic (see, among others Bringel and Pleyers 2022; della Porta 2022a, 2022b). In particular, as anticipated above, it goes beyond the current short-termism in existing literature by putting forward a medium-term approach to change. Second, it innovates it by adopting an actor-focused approach, overcoming current treatment of progressive social movements as a whole and accounting for the heterogeneity of the social movement organizations that compose it. Third, it challenges prevalent critical-juncture interpretations of the pandemic. In this regard, it shows that the pandemic left legacies on movement organizations in various degrees and extents. In doing so, it adds to the literature by disavowing views that consider the effects of critical junctures as if they were homogenous for any contentious actor. The results of this work lend evidence to the fact that to assess whether an event, like an emergency, was a critical juncture for a movement organization, its effects must be considered not in isolation but in interaction with antecedent condition of that specific organization. On this basis, in this thesis I have not only claimed that progressive movement organizations are heterogeneous, but also showed that, despite under the same emergency juncture, they change following multiple paths. These findings resonate with and expand previous insights regarding the relevance of the interlinkages among context - as it is perceived, interpreted and appropriated by actors - and actors' own characteristics in terms of organization and identity to explain collective action phenomena (Bosi and Zamponi 2020). While Bosi and Zamponi's (2020) concern was tracing different pathways toward the same form of action, with thesis I showed that these interlinkages do play out dynamically along the entirety of organizations' post-emergency

transformation trajectories. Moreover, I have provided evidence that to count as actors' own characteristics are not only identity and organization but also actors' mobilisations. That is to say, how actors changed in the post-emergency was *also* influenced but how they decided to respond to it. In a way, their reactions channelled the Covid-19's effects and evidence suggests that post-emergency changes resulted first and foremost from what actors chose to do during the emergency.

Capturing different pathways, hence, this dissertation created knowledge about *why*, *how* and *when* social movement organizations change after an exogenous shock which has highly altered conditions for critical mobilization.

Second, this thesis expands research on collective action in times of (multiple) crises. Specifically, it demonstrates that, akin to contexts of crises, actors tend to territorialize and re-materialize collective action – also thanks to the adoption of direct social action - even during and in the aftermath emergency situations (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, 2019).

Third, this dissertation made important contributions to research on collective action and time (Gillan and Edwards 2020). Temporality must be taken seriously when studying actors change overtime, especially after an exogenous shock like an emergency. Any abstract reference to social movements in times of 'emergencies' or 'crisis' (della Porta and Mattoni 2014; Andretta 2019; Bosi and Zamponi 2020), hence, overlooks the dynamic nature of time inherent in these contexts. This is all the more true after critical events, like a pandemic. These events should not be conceived as temporal monolith but studied in the nuanced temporalities they bring forward. Shifting temporalities - and the events within them - indeed contribute to reshape actors' challenges and opportunities in a dynamic way. Producing time-sensitive accounts of collective action's transformation becomes hence paramount.

Notwithstanding these contributions, there a number of limitations in this research I would like to briefly address. A major issue regards the scope of my argument. First and foremost, the time period under investigation was relatively limited. I conducted the interviews in 2022 in Milan and in 2023 in Paris. Thus, when I call some transformations as durable post-emergency transformations, this should be read with care. It is possible that some of the changes that took place during or after the emergency simply take longer to re-equilibrate. Second, even within the movements the different organizations belong to, the scope of the analysis has its limits. The heterogeneity of actors came at the expenses of the generalizability of the results even within the same movement. In other words, the trajectory I traced for the Yellow Vests of Montreuil cannot be said to speak for to the entirety of the Yellow Vests in Paris nor to be representative of the change of the Yellow Vests in France. Also, in terms of case selection, I performed a qualitative analysis of the most relevant actors for sectors of mobilization and prominence within the local movement milieu. However, this of course

represents only a snapshot of contentious actors and the power of the argument would benefit immensely from the inclusion of other organizations. Finally, in relation to fieldwork, I recognise that participant observation has been fragmented. Simultaneous work on more than one SMO – typically I focused on two SMOs per time – made field relationship management a tremendous effort. I also have to recognise that the limited continuous time I spent in Milan – one month in addition to many short trips – compared to Paris impacted on the amount and depth of the evidence I was able to collect.

Several avenues for research are open. In what follows, I will highlight at least three of them. First, exploration of movement organizations' change in other national contexts and concerning other types of movements, such as regressive movements, could add much needed comparative insights about the transformation of collective actors after critical events. Secondly, an aspect that has been presented in this work but not thoroughly addressed pertains to the biographical consequences of the emergency on activists. This micro-level focus would enable a comprehensive understanding of the medium-term impact of an emergency on patterns of political engagement. Thirdly, given my call for a nuanced approach to time, it would be highly intriguing to explore similarities and differences between how movements evolve after an emergency compared to after a crisis. In general, while the terms 'emergencies' and 'crisis' have been frequently used interchangeably in the literature - and sometimes ambiguously, especially with regard to Covid-19 which is at times referred to as an 'emergency' while other times as a 'crisis' - their analytical distinction could offer more detailed evidence on the challenges and opportunities that loom in the horizon for social mobilization and democratic engagement.

APPENDIX

Table 1. List of interviews

	Nickname	Collective actor	Date of the interview	Place of the interview	City
1	I1	Spazio 20092	20/05/2022	Spazio 20092	Milan
2	I2	Lambretta	12/07/2022	Lambretta	Milan
3	I3	Lambretta	13/07/2022	Lambretta	Milan
4	I4	Lambretta	15/07/2022	Lambretta	Milan
5	I5	Lambretta	6/09/2022	online	Milan
6	I6	Rimake	20/09/2022	online	Milan
7	I7	Spazio 20092	14/10/2022	online	Milan
8	I8	Rimake	13/11/2022	A market	Milan
9	I9	Rimake	15/11/2022	Café in Milan	Milan
10	I10	Rimake	16/11/2022	Café in Milan	Milan
11	I11	Collective Zam	18/11/2022	Zam	Milan
12	I12	Collective Zam	21/11/2022	Zam	Milan
13	I13	Collective Zam	22/11/2022	Zam	Milan
14	I14	Collective Zam	02/12/2022	online	Milan
15	I15	Spazio 20092	06/12/2022	online	Milan
16	I16	Collective Zam	09/12/2022	Zam	Milan
17	I17	Collective Zam	09/12/2022	Zam	Milan
18	I18	Spazio 20092	06/12/2022	online	Milan
19	I19	Spazio 20092	16/12/2022	online	Milan
20	I20	Spazio 20092	28/12/2022	online	Milan
22	I21	XR Milan	07/07/2023	online	Milan
23	IR1	Intepro	27/03/2023	Café in Paris	Paris
24	IR2	Yellow Vests	03/04/2023	Aeri	Paris
25	IR3	Yellow Vests	14/04/2023	Private house of the interviewee	Paris
26	IR4	Yellow Vests	14/04/2023	Café in Paris	Paris
27	IR5	Yellow Vests	18/04/2023	Café in Paris	Paris
28	IR6	Yellow Vests	09/05/2023	AERI	Paris

28	IR7	BSP	10/05/2023	Café	Paris
29	IR8	Interpro	11/05/2023	Café	Paris
30	IR9	XR Paris North	16/05/2023	Café	Paris
31	IR10	BSP	01/06/2023	Café	Paris
32	IR11	XR Paris North	02/06/2023	Café	Paris
33	IR12	XR Paris North	03/06/2023	Café	Paris
34	IR13	BSP	07/06/2023	Café	Paris
35	IR14	BSP	12/06/2023	Café	Paris
36	IR15	XR Paris North	15/06/2023	Café	Paris
37	IR16	Nous Toutes	16/06/2023	Private house of the interviewee	Paris
38	IR17	Interpro	19/06/2023	Interpro location	Paris
39	IR18	XR Paris North	22/06/2023	Café	Paris
40	IR19	Yellow Vests	23/06/2023	Café	Paris
41	IR20	DAL	01/07/2023	DAL	Paris
42	IR21	BSP	03/07/2023	BSP	Paris

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