

REIMAGINING THE URBAN COMMONS IN ITALY

Reform, Social Innovation,
and Transformation

Edited by Charmain Levy
and Marco Alberio

RESEARCH IN
URBAN SOCIOLOGY

VOLUME 19

REIMAGINING THE URBAN COMMONS IN ITALY

This collective work offers an international audience a richly documented and analytical study of urban commons in Italy, in all their diversity and inventiveness. It is a major contribution to the global debate on commons, conceived in their dual dimension of conflict and construction.

Since the Rodotà Commission, Italy has become a vast laboratory for urban commons. This book is the best testimony to date, both scientifically and in terms of its commitment.

Italian cities are the scene of a vital struggle between capitalist control (speculation, gentrification, overtourism) and the citizenship of the commons. It is this struggle that gives this scientifically rigorous book its universal dimension.

—Prof. Christian Laval,
**Professor of Sociology at the Université de
Paris Ouest Nanterre La Défense, France**

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RESEARCH IN URBAN SOCIOLOGY, VOLUME 19

REIMAGINING THE URBAN COMMONS IN ITALY: REFORM, SOCIAL INNOVATION, AND TRANSFORMATION

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Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL

First edition 2026

Editorial matter and selection © 2026 Charmain Levy and Marco Alberio.

Individual chapters © 2026 The authors.

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83662-607-7 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83662-606-0 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83662-608-4 (Epub)

ISSN: 1047-0042 (Series)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>About the Editors</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>About the Contributors</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xvii</i>
Introduction	1
<i>Marco Alberio and Charmain Levy</i>	
Chapter 1 The ‘Expressive’ Function of Urban Commons	17
<i>Antonio Putini</i>	
Chapter 2 Unveiling ‘Oppositional and Territorial Commoning’: Insights from the Self-Managed Places of Rome	35
<i>Simone Ranocchiari</i>	
Chapter 3 Commons as Utopias of Care: The Case of the Social Centre Lucha	55
<i>Ilaria Pitti</i>	
Chapter 4 The Commons as a Form of Urban Citizenship: From Post-Capitalist Resistance to Community Cohesion in Bologna	71
<i>Charmain Levy, Marco Alberio and Anna Rita Parini</i>	
Chapter 5 A Fleeting Utopia: Artistic Imagination and the Ephemerality of the Commons in Turin	89
<i>Marco Rossi and Antonio Vesco</i>	
Chapter 6 A School as a Common: How Community Participation Can Improve a Public Service and Transform It Into a Common	107
<i>Chiara Belingardi</i>	

Chapter 7 Communities and Common Consciousness: Exploring Commonalities for Pionta Park	125
<i>Francesca Bianchi and Gozde Yildiz</i>	
Chapter 8 Shared Administration of the Commons and the Challenge of Urban Nature: The Case Study of Bologna	143
<i>Roberta Bartoletti and Franca Faccioli</i>	
Chapter 9 Rethinking Top-Down Approaches in the Ethics of Co-Design: The Case of Reggio Emilia Collaborative Governance Model	161
<i>Irene Manzini Ceinar, Nicoletta Levi and Giulia Sgarbi</i>	
Chapter 10 Regeneration of Urban Commons and the Role of Culture: Bologna as a Case Study	185
<i>Giulia Allegrini, Teresa Carlone and Roberta Paltrinieri</i>	
Chapter 11 Renewable Energy Communities: What Transformative Potential for Local Areas?	205
<i>Domenica Farinella and Monica Musolino</i>	

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for financially supporting our research project and the publication of this collective volume. We would also like to thank the Centre de Recherche sur le Développement Territorial (CRDT) and the Fonds de Recherche du Québec – Société et Culture (FRQSC) for their financial support in the preliminary stages of this research project. We would like to thank the University of Bologna's Department of Sociology for their reception and tactical support.

We would like to thank the students who helped us with our research project and the publication of this book: Anna Rita Parini, Mario Marotta, Rebecca Plachesi and Lawrence Spafford. We would like to thank all of the authors for their collaboration and for making this book project an incredibly pleasant, insightful and stimulating experience.

Finally, we would like to thank all of the commoners whose experiences can be found in this volume for welcoming the authors into their commons spaces and sites and providing us the possibility through their experiences to advance knowledge on the commons.

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INTRODUCTION

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THE INTERNATIONAL AND ITALIAN DEBATE ON COMMONS

The concept of commons occupies a central position in the contemporary sociological debate. It refers to shared resources – both material and immaterial – that are collectively managed by a community, outside the conventional frameworks of the market or the state. These include goods such as water, the environment, public spaces, knowledge and social services – resources that require practices of care, equitable access and shared responsibility ([Ostrom, 1990](#)).

In the Italian context, a well-known historical example of commons that began to take shape as early as the 12th century involves resources

such as forests, meadows, pastures, alpine huts, trails, and mountain roads – traditionally governed by institutions of civic use or forms of collective ownership ([Greco, 2014](#)). These institutions emerged from the need for local populations to autonomously and collectively manage their resources in order to ensure subsistence under harsh climatic conditions. ([Dalla Torre et al., 2021](#), p. 1; *Our Translation*)

Fast-forwarding to the 19th and 20th centuries, several attempts were made to dismantle this system in the name of modernization. Over time, this organizational model evolved into two main forms: one in which the resources were privatized and another in which rights of access and use remained available to local inhabitants.

Since the 1990s, the concept of the commons has come to represent, at first, a category of goods, a political approach and – more recently – a political notion and ideal ([Centemeri, 2018](#)). More specifically, the term ‘commons’ refers to resources that are accessible to all and collectively managed by a community that takes responsibility for their use and ensures their long-term accessibility and sustainability. This conception stands in strong contrast to the logic of

Reimagining the Urban Commons in Italy

Research in Urban Sociology, Volume 19, 1–16

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ISSN: 1047-0042/doi:[10.1108/S1047-004220250000019001](https://doi.org/10.1108/S1047-004220250000019001)

individual accumulation and privatization, instead advancing a model of governance based on cooperation and mutual commitment.

In the Italian academic literature, commons are conceptualized as

a set of necessarily shared goods. They are goods insofar as they enable the unfolding of social life, the resolution of collective problems, and the subsistence of human beings in relation to the ecosystems of which they are a part. (Donolo, 2010, p. 3; *Our Translation*)

Accordingly, the shared nature of the commons goes beyond mere accessibility and constitutes a structural condition for their full realization and long-term reproduction. Collective management is not simply a normative ideal but a foundational principle that ensures their quality, sustainability and social function – especially in light of the persistent dynamics of exclusion (Donolo, 2010).

The commons constitute a radical political alternative (Hardt & Negri, 2009), one capable of resisting the neoliberal appropriation of collective wealth. From a legal perspective, particularly within the Italian context, the commons have also been framed as an autonomous juridical category – one that must be safeguarded through legal and institutional mechanisms (Mattei, 2011). As such, they represent an emerging paradigm that challenges contemporary society to reconsider how we live together, share resources and build more equitable, participatory and sustainable communities.

In Italy, the debate on the commons has significantly evolved since the early 2000s, intertwining legal theory, social mobilizations and place-based practices. While some Italian legal scholars had already envisioned alternative forms of ownership during the 20th century, it was the work of the Rodotà Commission (2007) – tasked with reforming the legal framework governing public assets – that brought in the formal recognition of the commons as a distinct legal category. In this framework, the commons are defined as resources essential to the exercise of fundamental rights and to the full development of the individual, and whose protection must be ensured with a long-term, intergenerational perspective (Pecile, 2019). Although the proposed reform was never enacted due to political changes at the government level in 2009, the Commission's work has nonetheless played a pivotal role in inspiring counter-hegemonic uses and practices grounded in the notion of the commons (Pecile, 2019).

The 2011 referendum on public water – promoted by civic committees – marked a crucial turning point, affirming water as a common good and removing it from market-oriented frameworks. This event had a strong symbolic and political impact, contributing to the widespread adoption of the language of the commons within Italian public discourse. The referendum's success catalysed the emergence of new forms of participatory resource management, particularly in urban contexts (Bersani, 2011). Abandoned spaces were reactivated by collectives, associations and civic networks, giving rise to urban gardens, social centres, self-managed libraries and reclaimed factories. These practices – often informal and grassroots in nature, some of which are examined in this volume – demonstrate how the care of the commons can serve as a concrete tool for social inclusion, civic innovation and urban regeneration (Centemeri, 2018).

THE TRANSFORMATION OF CITIES, URBAN COMMONS AND COMMONING

In the past 40 years, major crises and shifts in the global and national economies have undermined the capacity of nation-states to provide structured responses to the newly emerging social risks (poverty, old age, rising unemployment, working instability, urban transformations etc.) (Alberio, 2020). Due to this withdrawal and/or repositioning of the national state, more sub-national actors, such as cities, have been invested with more responsibilities than in the recent past. Cities have subsequently become key actors of urban socio-economic development and an important social object for both academics and policy makers (Alberio, 2011). However, the city itself has also dramatically changed in the shift from the Fordist to the post Fordist era. As Bagnasco (2003) pointed out in the book *'Società fuori squadra' ('Out of Standard Society')* referring to Italian cities: 'things began to change with the end of industrial society and the emergence of a new economy driven by the production of immaterial goods' (p. 16 cited in Alberio, 2011; *Our Translation*). Indeed, with the decline of industrial society and the rise of an economy centred on immaterial production, cities have taken on an increasingly central role. The so-called new economy, initially associated with information and communication technologies, has gradually expanded to encompass the broader productive system and reproductive system. This transformation – exacerbated by the weakening of higher-level institutional powers – has led cities to reorganize themselves as complex social units while simultaneously exposing them to intensified inter-urban competition and new vulnerabilities. Market deregulation and the erosion of states' redistributive functions have further deepened social inequalities, producing visible spatial consequences – particularly in large metropolitan areas, where urban fragilities are amplified within a global context that would instead require stronger mechanisms for territorial rebalancing (Bagnasco, 2003).

Still today, in this era of advanced and transformed globalization, characterized by populisms and the rise of new limitations to the circulation of people and goods, cities face new and important challenges. Although these phenomena take place in almost every context, they seem to be more visible in big international, cosmopolitan cities, which have also been defined as global cities (Sassen, 1991, 2017). According to this approach, the city loses its main historical function and ceases to play a decisive role in social integration. As suggested by certain leading authors such as Castells, Sassen and Soja, post-industrial cities and neighbourhoods under certain conditions may lose their ability to construct citizenship and generally undergo a redefinition of their social identity and roles (Alberio, 2011, 2018).

However, this does not mean that there is no space for social change and reaction. It is in this perspective indeed that we look at practices of commons, commoning and the resulting process of social innovation as forms of resistance put into action by citizens who oppose the neoliberal paradigm and its subsequent consequences, such as overtourism, gentrification and socio-economic segregation that have reshaped cities in recent decades.

Urban transformation through the commons and its associated practices (social innovations, social economy and cooperation) has the potential to address systemic power issues, transform subjectivities, contribute to new modes of thinking, and facilitate popular political alliances across civil society. The establishment of alternative institutions by political society, in addition to the alteration of the balance of forces and the strategic engagement with ruling institutions, is conducive to the opening of new possibilities. The transformation of cleavages, or the gradual process by which they are modified, is of particular interest. Many urban commons experiences take the form of bottom-up, grassroots, horizontal decision-making and egalitarian self-organization. In this sense, the urban commons as theorized by several authors goes beyond citizens' response to municipal policies or private initiatives to address specific neighbourhood issues. [Kioupkiolis \(2022\)](#) goes as far as to speak of 'alter-politics' in Italian cities.

However, common urban policies and designs allow municipalities to relegate the management and maintenance of public properties at a low cost to the public coffers. While a large part of the literature defines urban commons as a product of a conflictual relation between citizens and public authorities ([Kip, 2015](#)), the top-down model involves more collaboration and less politicization in terms of questioning the dominant neoliberal city. It allows municipal governments to quell social discontent by integrating citizen initiatives that do not question their politics and, through urban regeneration, to gentrify certain areas of the city. This does not mean that these initiatives cannot be considered a form of commons, but that the transformative element is insignificant or even non-existent. Nevertheless, Saying this, we do not imply that. that there cannot be initiatives that improve city spaces, foster political awareness among citizens and improve their collective well-being ([Caciagli & Milan, 2021](#)). Urban commons also came to identify less conflictual and more collaborative urban practices that were not necessarily focused on challenging the inequalities of the neo-liberal model of urban development, but rather involved in filling the gaps left by local policies without challenging them ([Levy et al., 2024](#)).

Urban commons initiatives can represent resistant and transformative spaces that challenge the neoliberal urban development model, or they can be incorporated into the processes of urban transformation when they are recovered and repurposed, hence becoming functional to the urban development model they initially opposed. Some experiences englobe the first two, whereas others the first and third ([Caciagli & Milan, 2021](#)). At one end, municipal authorities delegate responsibility to other parties. The notion of civic actors assuming responsibility in the context of urban regeneration processes, with the underlying motivation of scarce public economic resources, has been a subject of discourse in academic literature ([Bellè, 2023](#); [De Tullio, 2020](#); [Levy, 2023](#)). This concept has been identified as a valid and coherent manifesto for public participation and civic engagement. Conversely, the advent of bottom-up experiences that claim spaces and provide services not proffered by the state has also been observed.

The concept of urban commons, as has been widely observed, refers to shared resources and spaces, in particular within cities, that are collectively managed and used by the community. These resources are not owned by individuals or corporations but are, at least in theory, accessible to all and are governed collectively, often with a focus on sustainability, equity. The concept of the urban commons encompasses both the urban identities of the inhabitants of an area, and the relationships that these individuals have with their built and natural environment. thus not simply an object but rather a dynamic process. Through their daily activities and struggles, individuals and social groups create the social world of the city and, in doing so, create something common (Kip, 2015).

It is in this perspective that Dardot and Laval (2014) distinguish between commoning, as a political principle based on collaboration and self-management practices, and the commons, in the plural, defined as the assets that produce or result from such collaborative activities. Commoning is thus considered the principle of action against the neoliberal logic and neoliberalism itself. A common involves commoning practices that protect a resource from the market and the market forces that try to capture it (Harvey, 2012). In this sense, commons and commoning are closer to the idea of care and protection from the uses and abuses of the market - whether these could take place with or without the formal consent of the State. Linebaugh (2014) conceives commoning as a verb—an ongoing social practice rooted in mutual care, cooperation, and resistance to enclosure by private or state interests. In the urban context, this includes forms of radical and grassroots urban self-management that challenge commodification and promote inclusive, democratic participation in shaping the city. It reminds us of Polanyi's idea of the embeddedness of the economy in society (Mingione, 2018), since these practices allow the community to (re)appropriate things, places and relations from which they have been prevented or limited.

Commoning is also related to other concepts such as social innovation, which focuses not only on the initiatives as objects but also on the transformative processes from a more dynamic perspective. Social innovation permeates everyday social relations, which are often locally based. However, they can also perform on a larger scale through mobilizations and transfers of 'best practices' involving the mobilization of local communities, as well as the daily governance and durability of locally produced social innovations. Social innovations also depend on actors' capacity to mobilize human and material resources and to pool forces and synergies in favour of a larger social process. However, social innovation, like other forms of local welfare, faces several obstacles, including the relational, economic and political order (Alberio, 2018). As described in the case studies analysed in this volume, many urban commons experiences take the form of bottom-up, grassroots, horizontal decision-making and egalitarian self-organization. Urban transformation found in the commons and its associated features (social innovation, social economy and cooperation), although often small scale, can involve addressing systemic power issues, transforming subjectivities, contributing to new modes of thinking, empowerment, facilitating popular political alliances across civil and political society, creating alternative institutions, shifting the balance of power and strategically engaging with ruling institutions to open cleavages or to gradually transform them.

AN OVERVIEW OF THIS BOOK

The Italian context offers fertile ground for the development of the commons paradigm – a context in which civic participation intersects with legal and social innovation (Alberio, 2017; Pecile, 2019). Although a comprehensive legal recognition of the commons is still lacking at the national level, the diverse local experiences – some of which are explored in the chapters of this book – deserve to be brought to the attention of the international reader, as they highlight the vitality of a model capable of redefining the relationships between citizens, institutions and territories, albeit with certain limitations.

As already highlighted in the first part of this introduction, Italy has a long history and tradition of commons and commoning practices, as well as examples of laws and regulations that have tried to frame these practices in models of collective governance, mainly at the local level.

The literature review shows how Italian cities – such as Bologna, Naples, Turin and Rome, among others – offer compelling examples of commons-oriented urban practices, with different levels of institutionalization. Our aim as editors was not to collect all the experiences in one book, but rather to focus on a limited number of experiences in order to highlight their main characteristics: the specific political and socio-economic needs that are being addressed; the different motivations, discourses and actions put forward by different groups (citizen's association, squatters, students' association etc.); and the relationship between local communities and public institutions (municipalities and other entities in charge, for example of infrastructure such as schools, dismissed hospitals and military areas). By taking this approach, we were mainly interested in bringing to the fore, the social, territorial and political mechanisms that underpin this type of initiative.

Several contributions of our book focus on the city of Bologna, a case that demonstrates the importance of *path dependency* in structuring certain political, infrastructural and social conditions around the implementation of commoning initiatives. Bologna is nationally and internationally recognized as a pioneer and urban laboratory for social innovation in the field of shared commons governance. Often referred to as *la rossa* (the red) – a nod to its progressive political tradition – it is also known as *la cooperativa* (the cooperative) due to the strong presence of social enterprises, mutual aid organizations and cooperatives embedded in its urban fabric (Carlone & Landi, 2020). Bologna illustrates how cooperative traditions can be combined with civic experimentation to develop commons governance models that – at least in principle – aim at inclusion and participation (Bellè, 2023). In fact, over the years, the municipality has developed organizational structures aimed at enabling collaborative governance. As Carlone (2022, p. 99) notes,

administrative tools had to adapt to a clear political choice: in this context, several key instruments were introduced, including the Regulation on the Governance of Urban Commons adopted in 2014 (Arena & Iaione, 2012; Labsus, 2014), the procedures for the allocation of public spaces and buildings, as well as for the recognition of place-based civic

initiatives in urban and social domains, which have contributed to generating value in peripheral areas and in the reuse of abandoned or underutilized sites. (*Our Translation*)¹

This regulation, which is not exempt from criticism, enables citizens to enter into collaboration agreements with the municipal administration for the shared management of public spaces, as well as material and immaterial commons. A wide range of initiatives have emerged from this framework, including urban gardens, self-managed libraries, cultural venues and educational spaces for children. The stated aim is to position citizens as co-producers of public value within a framework of shared responsibility and civic innovation (Donolo, 2010). Despite some limitations, Bologna offers an example of how cities can promote active citizenship, where the notion of the commons is not merely an abstract ideal but an everyday practice (Allegrini, 2016) – at least in the declared intentions.

This is also true in other cities with a different history. Turin, for example had a tradition of working-class neighbourhoods due to the presence of the Italian automobile enterprise FIAT, which is one of the biggest car factories in Europe. In Naples, a wealth of social movements, such as the alternative anti-globalization groups or the organized unemployed, has also created a vital environment for commoning practices. Rome, being the capital of Italy, has the peculiarity of being embedded in politics and political activism, which permeates all its spheres.

However, certain cases can also surpass the urban dimension. Indeed, as observed in Italy, the governance of commons started from marginal mountain areas in the 12th century. This is why despite the book's focus on urban commoning, we have also included a chapter comparing an urban common with a rural one, one in the North and another one in the South, as well as two chapters on a medium-size cities, one in Tuscany and the another in Reggio Emilia in the Reggio Emilia region. The inclusion of these examples is essential in order to provide context. The concept of the commons is understood in a variety of ways, and this understanding helps us to comprehend its role in shaping different experiences of the commons.

A last important element to keep in mind when considering Italy, its cities and territories is the historical dualism between Northern and Southern Italy (Mingione, 1997; Trigilia, 2012), something that will also emerge in the analysis

¹Furthermore, in 2016, 'a reform of local decentralization was launched, reshaping the institutional framework of the municipality by designating the city's neighbourhoods (*Quartieri*) as the central axis for developing participatory processes and shared governance of collective goods. Within this structure, *Reti e Comunità* (Networks and Communities) offices were established as operational units within each *Quartiere*, tasked with fostering proximity-based relationships with local communities and building strategic alliances for territorial care. A third pillar of this new institutional arrangement is the Foundation for Urban Innovation (*Fondazione per l'Innovazione Urbana*, FIU), a multidisciplinary center for research, development, co-production, and communication of urban transformations. The FIU promotes processes aimed at transforming and regenerating urban spaces – not only in material and infrastructural terms [...] but also in symbolic and immaterial dimensions' (Carlone, 2022, p. 99–100; *Our Translation*).

of certain case studies proposed in the following chapters, particularly concerning the specific problems and social risks at stake in each context.

The authors of the 11 chapters presented in this book have different disciplinary backgrounds. Including the book editors, we have anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, political scientists, researchers in education, architects and urbanists. We gathered not only scholars from all around Italy, from North to South, but also practitioners and managers of public administrations providing different gazes and perspectives. The variety of authors also relates to age and generation, including early, mid-career and senior scholars who may have a different experience, historical perspective and therefore a different view of the commons. A final point of diversity among the contributions pertains to the perspectives they adopt. Certain chapters focus on radical practices and approaches, while others centre on more institutionalized initiatives. However, all chapters offer a critical perspective that takes into account both the strengths and limitations of these practices.

This edited collection seeks to contribute to the effervescent debate on the urban commons principally by offering a better understanding of the different aspects, characteristics, challenges, contradictions and potential of the urban commons in Italy by asking, among others, the following questions: In which ways do the urban commons and their socially innovative governance challenge the urban development model? How do territorial and local communities contribute through commoning practices to create and disseminate social innovation, thus recognizing its structuring effect? Do these groups and initiatives always position themselves differently from the neoliberal model of urban development, and if so, how? How do urban commons initiatives promote the idea of citizenship and the right to the city in a context that seems to be dominated by market forces (tourism, gentrification etc.) even at the micro-local level? For this reason, the case studies and chapters presented in this book are quite diverse. However, they present shared themes such as care, culture and ecology, as well as tension around institutionalization and transformation. We can identify at least three common elements in all of them. The first is to consider urban commons and urban commoning at the same time, thus adopting a dynamic perspective on commons (Dardot & Laval, 2014).

The second shared element is that care is at the heart of commoning practices. It is indeed about care for people (through education, the provision of social assistance, empowerment etc.), care for public spaces and territories (regeneration of abandoned infrastructures to be invested in by all citizens, requalification of neighbourhoods and villages), as well as care for nature (from green and parks to energy) (Levy & Belingardi, Forthcoming).

Another common element concerns the expressive function of commons and commoning practices. Despite authors having different viewpoints on the concrete results put forward by this type of initiative, all of them agree on the contribution 'to reimagining urban citizenship by reclaiming space, fostering solidarity, and promoting alternative visions of urban life' (Levy et al., in this book).

All contributions also analyse governance mechanisms, observing how the different models of organization and governance may give rise to different