The intelligence of the cities. Conflictual mutualism and the feminist approach through some case studies

L'intelligenza delle città. Mutualismo conflittuale e l'approccio femminista attraverso alcuni casi di studio

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DOI: 10.14658/pupj-rsld-2023-4-9

Abstract. In the plurality of the crises that intersect on the global scenario in recent decades highlighting in various ways the inadequacy and deficiency of the welfare systems in which most of our choices as inhabitants of a place are embedded, the need for a re-positioning at the center, as something "social" and therefore "of everyone," of the "reproduction of living conditions" seems clear. Starting from this premise, and through some Spanish case studies, the question from which this research moves is articulated in the following way: what characteristics should these experimental practices have in order not to be reduced to soothing the wounds inflicted by capitalism and by the progressive privatization of the welfare system, but to become instruments capable of intercepting all the lines of power and oppression that cross social relations? The proposed attempt at an answer is articulated around practices of "conflictual mutualism" analyzed through a feminist perspective in order to highlight new and more complex features to mark a city as "smart".

Abstract. *Nella pluralità di crisi che si intersecano sullo scenario globale negli ultimi decenni evidenziando in vari modi l'inadeguatezza e l'insufficienza dei sistemi di welfare in cui sono inserite gran parte delle nostre scelte come abitanti di un luogo, appare chiara la necessità di un ri-posizionamento al centro, come qualcosa di "sociale" e quindi "di tutti", della "riproduzione delle condizioni di vita". Partendo da queste premesse, e attraverso alcuni casi studio spagnoli, la domanda da cui muove questa ricerca si articola nel seguente modo: quali caratteristiche dovrebbero avere queste pratiche sperimentali per non ridursi a lenire le ferite inferte dal sistema capitalistico e dalla progressiva privatizzazione del welfare, ma diventare strumenti capaci di intercettare tutte le linee di potere e di oppressione che attraversano le relazioni sociali? Il tentativo di risposta si articola intorno a pratiche di "mutualismo conflittuale" analizzate attraverso una prospettiva femminista, al fine di evidenziare nuove e più complesse caratteristiche per connotare una città come "intelligente".*

Keywords: *mutualism, feminism, neighborhood, solidarity, intelligence*

1. Setting the scene

Several strands of thought that use the term "anthropocene" to define the contemporary era and constitute a critique of it (Burgio, 2022), imagine and prefigure a future in which humans can live in societies capable of respecting plural identities and manage to thrive in harmony with the environment and other species (Haraway 2019, Fulghesu, 2022). But, as Giuliana Misserville suggests, the scenario, while being "fantastic," is also presented as rather ambiguous: in fact, while such narratives recall the "extraordinary" and science fiction, they also evoke the representation of a world and a society that, in order to be activated toward change, must necessarily bring forth instances that dismantle the established order, take a stand against the power, injustice, and hypocrisy of contemporary living (Misserville, 2022). "Fantastic" stories can thus be considered useful starting points for thinking seriously and actively about the world we want to live in. Change, however, is not only storytelling, it is also and above all concrete action that acts on relationships, as mentioned above. And it is in this perspective that the reflection that this research paper proposes is situated, introducing into contemporary urban scenarios some insights from the feminist perspective in the analysis of the use and organization of people's social life in inhabited space. A perspective that brings a look "from below" and has the everyday as its field of action, noting the needs of those who inhabit a given place and placing the caring relationship at the center of political action by identifying it as a "social right" (Casalini, 2018).

With this kind of "glasses" it becomes possible to clearly recognize the effects of choices (and thus policies) made in a given place day by day intercepting the diversity of bodies (Belingardi et al, 2019; Feminism&thecity, 2022).

And, yet, it is not easy to change perspective: as Sara Ongaro wrote, in practicing the change one learns that it is really difficult to think of an alternative to misery, male supremacy, and aggression to Nature placed outside the system of capital's incessant growth (Ongaro, 2012). In order to find a way forward, but without going into other scenarios such as those outlined, for example, by degrowth theory (Latour, 2013), it is important to recognize that there is a real need to shift from the priority given to the economy as the exclusive production of profits-which has also encompassed reproduction (Del Re, 2016)-to the priority given to the material, affective, cultural, psychological, and symbolic processes through which human life regenerates itself.

In this context, it seems interesting to point out that: A) all these actions are given in the space and in the place in which we inhabit, understood not

only as 'a roof over our heads', but as the wide system of relationships unfolded in the context of our everyday life (Vettoretto, 2009); B) public policies and practices, able to translate the needs expressed by the inhabitants into a system of welfare, are given in this same 'enlarged' space.

But the question remains: what kind of 'intelligence' is needed by the city in order to ensure that the practices adopted in the context in which our lives unfold are definitely set in the direction of change?

The research explores the study cases of Barcelona and Madrid with a specific perspective, the one of the "conflictual mutualism" (Cannavò, 2018), a type of mutualism that does not stand for welfarism or for a generic support to an unequal socio-economic system, but rather pursues the goal of organizing subjectivities acting to collectively improve people's living conditions while simultaneously developing both a political awareness and a capacity to act against public and private powers in asserting and defending their Then, again following the feminist perspective, able to highlight the lines of power and oppression that run through traditionally patriarchal and masculinist societies such as those that characterize today's landscape, the research identifies practices and theoretical elements inspired by intersectional thinking that emphasizes how such lines of oppression can be not only multiple (gender, skin color, age, religion, class), but also simultaneous and co-present in the same subject (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991).

By recognizing and respecting subjectivities at the linguistic, relational, and political levels, the feminist approach appears a suitable tool capable of activating political intervention from the self and in relation to peers, in a truly inclusive bottom-up construction, fostering the fact that mutualistic practices should be characterized by the element of reciprocity, which is not a delivery of services from A to B, but is based on a relationship of 'care' among the people who build up the community (Federici, 2010). For this reason, on the issue of care this research paper pays a specific attention, noting how a feminist approach: A) allows for in-depth reflection starting from the experience of those who, for centuries, have experienced (and largely still experience today) on their own skin the burden of unpaid reproductive labor, i.e., women; B) questions how to activate practices able to take into account the ambivalent relationship between women and care; C) recognizes the social and economic value of reproductive labor (free and waged) considering it a priority in the context of rethinking the whole economic system and the organization of welfare through services (Chistè, Del Re, and Forti, 2020). Through a methodology based on the analysis of literature and interviews conducted in the field, the analysis of case studies identified in Spanish territory will show how the mutualist perspective contributes to activating mechanisms not only of mere survival in urban contexts, but of

true "empowerment" of the people involved when a feminist approach is incorporated into "care" practices (Del Re, 2016).

2. Defining mutualism: a historical background

In biology, mutualism is defined as an association among individuals of different species, also called mutualistic symbiosis, which involves a mutual benefit for the associated individuals, without this relationship being obligatory, since the two species can also live independently of each other (Bronstein, 2015). In the socioeconomic field, the term takes its cue from this definition and, during the XIX century, it developed specifically through the theories of Pierre Joseph Proudhon, becoming one of the forms of experimentation with self-management and self-organization of the industrial and peasant working class (Woodcock, 2014). Although, on the one hand, the concept of mutualism expresses the need for reciprocal support to make up for the lack of welfare for the most exploited social classes in the capitalist economy, on the other hand, mutualism represents also an attempt to offer an alternative to the capitalist system, promoting associationism based on the principle of reciprocity: in the mutual economy people do not operate to make a profit, the exchanged 'good' is sold and bought at a fair value, without speculation and contrary to the law of supply and demand (Fox, 2021). The goal is to satisfy individual needs, which become the parameter for the definition of the real value of a good, and the production is organized on the principle of self-management, challenging the principle of hierarchy and thus the structure of capitalist production (Cannavò, 2018). This gives rise to mutual aid associations and consumer cooperatives that exchange basic necessities without speculation; production cooperatives based on self-management; mutual credit societies that freely grant credit with very low, non-speculative interest rates, necessary only to cover administrative costs and thus favoring the interests of participants rather than bankers (Amendola et al., 2021); mutual insurance societies in which members undertake to help each other in the event of problems of various kinds (illness, fire, accidents, etc.); mutual aid organizations that provide goods and services reimbursable with work vouchers.

To better understand how an organization of urban society based on mutualism would contain elements of "intelligence" useful to the contemporary city, a brief historical overview in order to detach this type of mutualism from other practices, will be detailed in the following lines.

Beginning in the 1840s, mutualism became established in Europe and especially in Italy, France, and England. Inspired by the reflections of utopian

socialist Robert Owen, in 1844 the Rochdale Society of Equitable Pioneers (Rochdale), a cooperative trading in essential groceries to counter both the prices kept high by other shopkeepers and food fraud to increase profit, began in Manchester. This gave birth to the Rochdale Principles, based on the ideals of mutualism and mutual aid, democracy, self-responsibility, equality and fairness. Principles that have since inspired the cooperative movement worldwide, not just in England: For example, in Italy, there were 443 registered mutual trade companies in 1862, rising to 4,896 in 1885 (Luciano, 2012). The development was impressive, and what pushed the creation of these societies for the improvement of the living conditions of factory and field workers was the shared value of solidarity: mutualism replaced the absence of a welfare state, soothed the wounds caused by capitalism on the skin of workers living in extremely harsh conditions of exploitation, deprived of the minimum social rights.

At this early stage of their rise, mutualist societies were mostly accepted by governments and industrialists (Archambault, 2021): the mere suppression of discontent on the conditions in the workplace was not sustainable in the long run, and therefore, if trade unions were not allowed, the philanthropic way of supporting the poorer classes initially found financial support even from enlightened bourgeoisie, since the societies were focused on financial aid and support for members in sickness, education and education for their children, job placement, and even the creation of workers' credit. As stated by Ferrera, Fargion and Jessoula (2012), the societies were in fact also opportunities for social life, places for meeting and relationships outside the nagging life of the factory or the fields, and thus venues for discussion or confrontation on common problems, occasions for ties that were being sewn for the first time and that would allow a very important first passage, from solidarity to 'resistance.' At the end of the Century, this transition phase determined a fracture in mutual societies between the moderate, linked to the concept of assistance to the people in need, and the socialists, which prioritize the political goal of working-class representation and social legislation. These societies were configured not as parties in the best-known sense, more linked to personal membership and winning electoral struggles, but they represented an interesting experience of political-social movements, an evolution, or better, a process of transition from the elementary forms of solidarity to the trade union forms with a specific political connotation, able to transform men and women from passive objects in the economic realm into active political subjects who claim their own identity, their own needs, impetuously entering the public arena (Dreyfus, 1993). In this scenario, conflictual mutualism can be intended as a "political" stance, in the sense that while it exists it already claims "the new", expressing solidarity "against" the

present state of affairs, in order to broaden the field of social rights, public guarantees, services, rights, spaces, but it also demands a solidarity made up of immediate responses to immediate needs (Cannavò, 2018). This type of mutualism, therefore, claims an enlargement of the welfare state and is neither intended to replace the tasks of the State, nor to soothe the wounds of capitalism, nor to manage poverty, acting as a crutch for an unjust system.

Nevertheless, it is important to shed light to some possible misinterpretations of mutualism: as Alisa Del Re warns, a strong ambivalence characterizes both social volunteering and nonprofit cooperative forms related for example to the reproduction of individuals. While. On the one hand, they constitute extraordinary devices of subjectification, on the other hand, they seem perfectly compatible with austerity policies as instruments of socialization of production costs. It is of no coincidence that local governments are increasingly resorting to social volunteering and cooperation in emergencies, and in this sense, there is a real risk that pooled reproductive activities will become merely instruments of poverty management instead of devices for the re-appropriation of wealth (Del Re, 2015).

In the following paragraphs, two case studies in Spain will be analyzed, in order to highlight the undeniable ambivalences that have led mutualistic forms of "welfare" to replace the commitment of the State. In this sense, great attention must be paid to these aspects when talking about 'care', even and especially when it is proposed as a 'revolutionary political element" (The Care Collective, 2021), because if untethered from a feminist and conflictual approach, 'may risk becoming a strategy of governing complexity and, at the same time, 'depowering conflictualities', just as it has been an instrument of women's subjugation for long centuries 'the model of care work is the strongest of those available to 'grab the soul' (Morini, 2021).

The cases we are going to analyze in the next paragraphs are certainly revealing of an entrenched mutualist practice with a conflictual matrix. Less evident, however, appears to be an awareness of the importance of deconstructing power relations through a feminist perspective.

3. The care networks in Madrid in Covid19 pandemic: the case of FRAVM

Spanish mutualism networks have received a great response in terms of support and aid to the most fragile people since the outbreak of the Covid19 pandemic in the early 2020s.

It is important to note that the great response given by the different Spanish mutualism organizations in the most emergency phase of the first lock-

down of 2020 was possible only because of the preexistence of these organizations; many existing collectives had to reinvent themselves in the light of the social distancing guidelines, many others were born in the very moment of need, but based on preexisting political experiences to respond to a social crisis, broader than the one of 2008.

According to Alvaro Lorite, journalist of the periodical "El Salto", neighborhood collectives in Madrid emphasize that these networks are not spontaneous, but are made possible by an attitude to networking and neighborhood solidarity prior to the Covid19 crisis (Lorite, 2020). This reference to the pandemic is important because it represents one of peaks of activation of the mutualist practices in the urban environment, and analyzing it can be useful to highlight some of the problems that have emerged in the functioning of the networking. As happened elsewhere, at the beginnings of the Covid pandemic, organizations already existing in the urban environment or born in the aftermath of the emergency, effectively filled the inadequacy of institutional aid and the slowness of the bureaucracy to cope with the growing demand for essential goods such as food, prevention tools such as masks, and home care. In short, they have been coping with severe welfare shortfalls, due to the trend of cuts carried out in Spain as well as in Italy and other countries in previous years. However, giving value to the neighborhood relationships is not always easy and immediate: during the pandemic, many collectives in Madrid have been attacked and ignored by those in charge of the management of the city administration (Lorite, 2020). In early May, as reported by an Italian website quoting El Salto, an activist in the neighborhood of San Blas (Madrid) harangued neighbors queuing in front of a solidarity food pantry: "This distribution point is a complaint for social services, a complaint from all those people who will not be assisted because they do not fit the bureaucratic profile of social services" (Martinez, 2020). Two weeks after the 2020 lockdown, the wave of requests for aid for essential goods increased very quickly, and the profiles of users were for the most part non- compliant: undocumented nonregular migrants who could not therefore even formally apply for aid; migrants and native people without a regular or only partially regular work contract; female workers employed in the cleaning services, regularized just for few hours per week, who were actually doing full-time work but receiving a subsidy related only to the few regularized hours; elderly people without a family or social support network; migrant or native families without technological tools to be able to access the online education for their children. Situations that, as Martinez notes, either do not fall under the profiles of social services or remain harnessed in the long times of the institutional bureaucratic machine (Martinez, 2020).

Spanish mutualist organizations in the Madrid area during the Covid emergency, worked really hard not to leave the most fragile people in destitution and loneliness. What they understood, however, was that they were filling the gaps in a system weakened by welfare cuts and thus they rejected the 'political hat' the institutions were trying to give to their work (Martinez, 2020). The work carried out by the care networks put into evidence the shortcomings of the capitalist system, shedding light on the invisibility of the most vulnerable people, and on the scarcity of resources generated after decades of cuts, as stated by the vice mayor of the city Begoña Villacís: "If we have to take something good out of this, it is that it has made us discover that we have neighbors, we share much more than the same address, we feel more Madrileños than ever" (El País, 20th March 2020). Villacis tried to make political capital out of the social work carried on in the neighborhoods, trying to hide what was really happening: a severe "lack of organization and personnel in Social Services" (El Salto, 15th April 2020).

At the end of May 2020, in order to have an idea of the development of mutualism networks in Madrid and in the rest of the Autonomous Community, these are just some of the data collected by the Madrid Federation of Neighborhood Associations (FRAVM) [Federación Regional de Asociaciones Vecinales de Madrid]: 58 mutualism networks created by neighborhood associations and neighborhood collectives have been born or consolidated, assisting more than 20,000 people. With their own resources and 6,179 volunteers, the networks are not limited to the most affected neighborhoods in the capital, but reach many cities and towns in the Autonomous Community of Madrid" (Martinez, 2020).

FRAVM has a long history in Spanish mutualism and represents a form of organizing and networking of different types of experience with the aim of translating concrete mutual aid practices into political terms[1]. The network of associations took its first steps illegally during the francoist dictatorship between the 1950s and the 1960s, when the "economic miracle" moved thousands of people to Madrid from the country's agricultural areas, in search of work, and found themselves living in shacks on the outskirts of a city that was not ready to accommodate that multitude (Perez and Sanchez, 2008). The lack of minimum essential services in these new residential areas led the inhabitants to collaborate in the form of mutual aid to survive, to hold their first protests to demand minimum rights, and to get closer to labor movements, all while suffering the extremely harsh repression of the Franco regime. In 1964, with the very timid opening to freedom of association with the *Ley de Asociaciones*, a number of neighborhood associations began to

1 https://aavvmadrid.org/quienes-somos/historia/

emerge, which, although under the strict control of the regime and with limited margins of movement, managed to achieve improvements in living conditions and moreover became spaces for meeting, discussion, and sharing. Elements that would prepare the transition to the democratic phase. It was in this way that the neighborhoods obtained schools, public lighting and water, and some years later the right to housing that dignified the process of settlement of the suburbs, weaving an active movement in the neighborhoods in which 'men and women of Madrid could develop spaces outside the despotism and inertia of the regime, laboratories where to forge the struggle for liberties"[2]. After Franco's death in 1975, the neighborhood associations, in a delicate democratic transition led initially by the same members who had ruled during the Franco dictatorship, watched over the end of the dictatorship, lobbied for democratic freedoms to be concretely introduced, and when necessary took to the streets.

In 1977 the FRAVM and many other associations were finally legalized. Since then, the neighborhood association movement has never stopped organizing the participation in public life of thousands of people to build a democracy that aspires to be participatory to transform the reality of cities and neighborhoods, bringing together more than 120,000 people in the community of Madrid, a real "citizen movement" able to face new and important challenges, such as actions and investments and new rules and regulations of citizen participation[3].

FRAVM states that today the struggle of neighborhood associations focuses against the privatization of public services and on the lack of investment in them; on the monitoring of the quality of the air and the electromagnetic pollution; on the contrast to gender-based violence; on the contrast to the exclusion of citizens from the management of public issues and the questioning of urban and infrastructure policies (Herrero, 2023).

FRVAM's appears to be a good example of organizing the various associations engaged in mutual aid so that they can exert greater and more widespread political weight. FRVAM's website is very up-to-date and carries var-

2 "A tejer un movimiento activo en los barrios en el que los madrileños y madrileñas pudieran desarrollar espacios ajenos al despotismo e inercia del régimen, laboratorios donde fraguar la lucha por las libertades." https://aavvmadrid.org/quienes-somos/historia/.

3 "Como en el viaje a Ítaca, todos estos años de camino sembrado de éxitos, fracasos y experiencias han hecho de las asociaciones vecinales, que agrupan a más de 120.000 personas de la Comunidad de Madrid, una realidad seria, vertebrada y legitimada por su pasado y su presente, un movimiento ciudadano que afronta nuevos retos y logra conquistas más recientes, como los planes de actuaciones e inversiones 1998-2003 en Usera-Villaverde, 2000-2005 en Puente y Villa de Vallecas, 2003-2007 en Vicálvaro, San Blas, Carabanchel-Latina, Tetuán… y nuevas normas y reglamentos de participación ciudadana." https://aavvmadrid.org/quienes-somos/historia/

ious news from the neighborhood associations that make up the federation, news concerning local struggles carried out by the associations, agendas with appointments with representatives of institutions, association meetings, etc.

4. Neighborhood Association in Barcelona: the case of FAVB

Similar to FRAVM's path in Madrid, is that of the *Federació d'Associacions de Vens de Barcelona* (FAVB), the Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Barcelona[4].

Founded in 1972 in a clandestine way under the Franco regime, it has become over the years a reference point for neighborhood movements; currently still active, it also works alongside other social actors trying to counterbalance the great economic powers and private interests that have as their goal urban speculation and the expulsion from the neighborhoods of the popular segments of the population.

In 2010, to commemorate the 40th anniversary of the neighborhood movement, the FAVB published the work "*1970-2010. 40 anys d'acció veïnal*" (40 years of neighborhood action), which collects the memory of one hundred neighborhood achievements that changed the city and can be identified on the map of neighborhoods in the form of spaces, buildings and structures, places that, without the city struggle, would not exist today. The map is complemented by a description of 13 claim areas on which many of the neighborhood associations' struggles have focused (among them: health care, women's rights, urban planning, education, sports, public services, etc.).[5] FAVB not only celebrating past successes but is still very active and has relaunched its initiatives in the wake of the Covid emergency.[6]

Barcelona has become one of the most interesting political laboratories in recent years. The economic crisis of 2008 was a powerful driver of social transformation for practices of democracy and self-management from below. The pressure of austerity policies led to the rise of social mobilizations against these policies up to the mobilization that covered all of Spain starting on May 15, 2011 with the movement known as the Indignados, a movement

4 Here the website of the association**:** https://www.favb.cat/hist%C3%B2ria-de-la-favb

5 https://favb.cat/100-lluites/ a from this link you can access the publication and visualization of the map and for each point you can read articles and explanations of the actions carried out by neighborhood associations that have been successful in that area.

6 https://www.favb.cat/seccions/comunicats at this link you can read the most recent communiqués from Barcelona neighborhood associations on the struggles in which they are active.

that called for a more participatory democracy, criticized the government's economic-financial decisions and did not feel represented by the two poles of the PSOE (Partido Socialista Obrero Español) and the PP (Partido Popular).

In Barcelona, as anticipated above with regard to FAVB's most recent action, this participatory development activated a broad mobilization against the processes of gentrification and expulsion of citizens from their homes in favor of the tourist industry and led in 2015 to the election of the mayor Ada Colau, a historical activist precisely from the PAH-*Plataforma d'Afectats per la Hipoteca* (platform of mortgage victims) movement. From 2006 to 2012, in fact, 420,000 housing units in Spain fell back into the hands of banks, with families unable to pay their mortgage payments ending up on the street overnight (Russo Spena, 2016).

Under the Spanish law, those who have taken out mortgages and can no longer pay them not only lose their homes, but also remain tied to the payment of the installments. PAH was founded in 2009 in Barcelona and spread throughout Spain with the intention of opposing evictions with pickets, protests, negotiations with banks, mobilizing lawyers and politicians with respect to a problem that combined with the difficulty of maintaining a rent, has reached dramatic stretches in Spain with striking cases of suicide (Iglesias et al., 2012). PAH is a mutualistic response to the violence of a political, financial, and real estate system that produces such suffering. As stated by the member of the PAH Vallekas:

> *'We have learned a lot about mutual support, organizing collective support services; we have learned how to read and understand laws and decipher bad banking practices, how to carry out direct action and civil disobedience, and we have learned how to coordinate at the local and state level a people's movement and exercise the ability to be spokespersons' (Tenhuen and Mirra, 2021).*

This is how the movement itself describes its journey through these intensely lived years of struggle. But it also adds a reflection on the many layers of oppressions of the system:

> *Last year, moreover, we embarked on a collective exploration of something else that we, the women in the group, had gradually learned between the lines: that we were constantly moving in the intersection between financial and housing violence and the violence of the patriarchal order. In the midst of a pandemic and inextricably from our struggle for housing, we set out to write the history of dispossession and housing rights from a feminist gaze (Tenhuen and Mirra, 2021).*

They also refer to an intersectional and feminist practice of approaching productive and reproductive labor. Alisa Dal Re, recalling the experience

of the women's group of the *Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca de Vallekas*, speaks of unionism of life, using a very beautiful term, which seems to extend the contemporary experience of the workers' struggles of the XX Century, combining them with the feminist experience:

> *It is a matter of confronting and taking charge with struggles and strikes in the sense of a unionism of life, since care is mostly work, so special and important that it must be put at the top of the list of changes right away. For this work to produce good care, we need to plan to invest socially for truly replacement services, adequate wages, and reduced work time. It is not enough to demand care; it is necessary for care is good care. [...] Starting with wages to counter the poverty of those working in reproductive labor, reducing the time of care work so that this work has meaning and produces care for all bodies, assuming the need for unconditional income for those without wages, could be the first goals that can be activated right away with struggles carried out by a unionism of life that allows the start of a concrete social transformation for a society of care (Del Re, 2016).*

Barcelona's political experience has thus demonstrated the possibility of building political movements from below that can also express city government. Ada Colau was reappointed in the 2019 elections. The impact of the pandemic on the city's policies was nevertheless, very heavy:

> *At the end of April [2020], 21 solidarity networks in Barcelona signed a manifesto denouncing how the city's Department of Social Services was assigning mutual support networks the cases they were unable to handle. With the social crisis caused by the coronavirus, these networks experienced exponential growth: From serving 1,100 people before the pandemic, they went from having to manage the needs of 5,500 (Martinez, 2020).*

The pandemic crisis has challenged this experiment, as well as the stability of the Mayor: the pressures were high, both left and right; the challenges were even more daunting due to the rising poverty and uncertainty about the future caused by Covid. The president of the Federation of Neighborhood Associations of Barcelona (FAVB), Ana Menéndez, although appreciating the efforts of the administration of the city always in dialogue with the FAVB, regrets the lack of "mechanisms for organized participation" and institutional response, and refers to the package of proposals on emergency housing that the city council raised to the consistory. She also questions the economic model outlined in the Pact for Barcelona that emerged from the pandemic. Neighborhood organizations did not sign it: "The way out of the crisis cannot be the recipe that has led us here, it must be a turnaround and diversification," says Menéndez (Blanchar, 2021).

In order for the best policy experiments, such as the one in Barcelona, to continue under the blows of the health-economic-social crisis, they need a change at the systemic level, starting with the redistribution of wealth. It is no coincidence that grassroots politics is also pushing in Spain for a basic income, which in the intent of one of its advocates, Sergi Raventós, a member of the Basic Income Network (Red Renta Básica) must be financed precisely by a redistribution of wealth.

> *"This has to be understood: when we talk about basic income, we are not talking about 'Come on, here we give money to everybody', but we mean that this has to be financed by the people with more money or more economic power." (Babiker, 2022).*

The current and future challenges are far-reaching; governments, even those born of bottom-up participation like the one of the city of Barcelona, are under severe pressure. But the large network of Spanish mutualism confirms what this research seeks to demonstrate: the extraordinary capacity of the political practice of mutualism to succeed in organizing diverse subjectivities that, as they participate to collectively improve their living conditions, they develop political awareness and simultaneously the capacity to act against public and private powers in asserting and defending their rights.

5. Conclusions

The practice of mutualism outlined in this paper is defined from the beginning as 'conflictual' because it aims to organize diverse subjectivities acting to collectively improve the living conditions of all and, at the same time, develop political awareness, as well as the means to act against public and private powers in the assertion and defense of their rights. It is a mutualism that, therefore, continuously questions the political administration of the city about the activation of those strategies considered the most suitable, case by case, to enhance the inhabitants as the protagonists of their daily life, in order to stay away from *welfarist* practices that instead make the people passive, reproducing dependence between those who provide a service and those who use it.

In doing so, mutualism does not aim to replace public services, but stands in antithesis. The very practice of conflictual mutualism is itself a critique of the capitalist economic system, which by focusing on profit devours chunks of public service every year in favor of privatization. If public services worked, if the city and the territory around it were able to show and apply its political 'intelligence', there would be less need for people to organize to help each other, for example, to access care. The mere fact that this happens

–mutualism is needed- is a critique of the inadequacy of welfare. But in the path of a mutualistic reality, people do not simply solve each other's problems; they understand the mechanisms that led to the difficulty or inability to enjoy basic rights and act to claim them.

The practices analyzed in the Madrid and Barcelona contexts have a long and articulated history and how important it is to revive social participation to change and improve the state of affairs. However, the limitations of mutualist action are obvious and are mostly related to a substantial lack of a critical look at the patriarchal system as argued by Perez Orozco (2022), so historically intertwined with the capitalist system. This aspect risks weakening the action of a conflictual mutualism that constitutively wants to place itself in antithesis to the logics of power and oppression inherent in social relations, attempting to revitalize characteristics of action such as solidarity, resistance and democratic participation.

The feminist approach, within which the practice of self-consciousness was born in the Seventies, in a path of mutualism, contributes at creating a perspective of interdependence because it confronts individuals with their personal frailties, fosters the recognition of a system of oppression that, in different ways, influences the lives of each person, and creates the basis for a break with the dominant masculinism, which in rejecting and hiding weaknesses has one of its distinctive elements (Cavarero,2001).

A feminist approach to mutual relations supports the development of an empathetic approach to the political journey of defending and asserting rights and seeking shared solutions, makes it clearer that political struggle should not be thought of as an abstract theory to be applied, but creates consequences in the bodies and souls of the people involved, and therefore with them must be constructed and adapted (Fraser, 1989; 2016). The feminist and intersectional approach in particular helps to recognize and respect the subjectivities that make up society, to deconstruct social roles, starting with language. It does not flatten differences, it recognizes them, respects them, considers them from an intersectional perspective of oppressions that people experience; at the same time that it asks how to overcome them, it enacts a practice that, in fact, overcomes them on a relational level, but seeks actions for overcoming them also on a material level for the improvement of living conditions. And at the same time, it questions how to implement an overcoming of intersectional oppressions on a more systemic level, of transforming reality and the structures that determine it.

A feminist approach in mutualism practices, ultimately, allows for the assumption of care as a paradigm that builds relationships because it recognizes the value of reproductive labor in society and acknowledges the value of a struggle to improve the working conditions of caregivers.

In fact, a conflictual mutualism based on a feminist approach introduces the idea that care is not only the cross and delight of the female gender, but must be a shared care with all genders, primarily activating the male gender, and that it has such a social and economic value that an equal division in roles in private and voluntary organizations' action in neighborhoods would not be sufficient but requires a rethinking of welfare and (re)productive work from the paradigm of interdependence.

Nevertheless, there is a question that has lingered in the background of this research paper, and would require another study: the best merits of mutualism (the great potential for subjectification and activation of democratic participation by creating an empathic bond between the participating subjects, the ability to bind very different people into a local political path based on solidarity and resistance, the first of all emotional and then political exchange that builds the group) on a broader, enlarged and distant level tends to be lost. Because, inevitably, the sharing of those mutualistic practices of improving living conditions that generate positive aspects have not yet been defined and maybe are impossible to be framed in a scheme, in a reproducible architecture. Both an advantage and a limit. What seems important to grasp from the Spanish experience is that, where there is a historical root of neighborhood solidarity, it should not be neglected; indeed, it should be corroborated with new instances and new perspectives, because in itself it is an asset and a concrete foothold for new and different welfare policies, not only related to emergencies and crises, but in an ongoing perspective, for the welfare of the people who in that place - in that city - live. Mutualism has turned out to be an interesting political laboratory, insofar as it has helped revitalize one of the deepest roots of the 'intelligence' of cities, made up of solidarity, resistance, and democratic participation, with the activation of precisely the most fragile people in society, and providing at least a first response to the needs of the people they inhabit. In the words of Mayor Ada Colau, to give "smart" answers to the needs of the inhabitants, one needs to study, sacrifice, invent and renew. There is no need for brand-new solutions, but to reopen and revitalize spaces of dialogue and interaction where people are (Russo Spena and Forti, 2016).

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