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## BOOK REVIEW

Levy, Charmain & Alberio, Marco, eds. (2026), *Reimagining the Urban Commons in Italy. Reform, Social Innovation and Transformation*, Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, pp. 249

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*Reimagining the Urban Commons in Italy* is both a work of critical reflection on public participation and civic engagement and a curated collection of testimonies, case studies, and experiences through which commons can be understood as tangible tools of social inclusion, civic innovation and urban regeneration (Centemeri, 2018). Its significance lies not merely in documenting participatory practices, but in interrogating the social, political and institutional conditions that render such experiences genuinely transformative or, conversely, that limit their potential. For this reason, such practices are approached as situated processes whose democratic quality depends on the distribution of power, resources and responsibilities among citizens, institutions and other stakeholders.

These practices are embedded in civic cultures (Dahlgren, 2018, pp. 20-21), described as the “features of democracy’s dynamics” that maintain the political involvement of citizens, within context-specific and historically contingent formations. In this respect civic engagement is a situated process through which citizens negotiate meanings, responsibilities and expectations in relation to public space and local institutions (Bartoletti & Faccioli 2020).

This question connects the volume to a broader debate on the relationship between civic action and urban governance, particularly in the context of austerity urbanism, the agonistic dimensions of democratic politics, and the retreat of welfare states across Southern Europe (della Porta 2015; Mouffe, 2018).

The volume, edited by Charmain Levy and Marco Alberio, positions Italy as a privileged site of observation. Its overall structure is organised around a broad notion of care: care for people, care for spaces and care for nature. This organising principle allows *commoning* practices to be read as forms of collective responsibility grounded in equitable access and long-term shared, sustainable governance (Ostrom, 1990). The result is a text that contributes to urban sociology, while also

engaging with the debate on territorial welfare, public and institutional communication and processes of civic and social engagement.

One of the volume's key contributions is its theoretical framing: *commons* are analysed not only as shared resources but also as social and political practices in their own right. Drawing on the definition proposed by Dardot and Laval (2014), the authors distinguish between *commoning* — understood as a political principle grounded in collaboration and practices of self-governance, with attention to processes, social relations, and shared care — and *commons*, defined as the material and immaterial resources that either emerge from such collaborative activities or make them possible.

Commons thus encompass resources to be managed collectively and in the general interest, such as water, the environment, public spaces, and social services. However, the book argues that such resources cannot be analysed solely as assets to be preserved or administered, since they acquire political and social meaning through the very social practices that produce and regulate them. In this sense, the volume's added value lies in shifting attention away from the specific object of commons (resource, space, infrastructure) towards the process of *commoning* itself, focusing on who participates, under what rules, through what conflicts, and with what transformative effects.

It is precisely through this lens that the book documents radical and grassroots forms of urban self-governance and transformative processes of social innovation that promote inclusive and democratic participation in city-building, including through bottom-up dynamics.

The centrality of the Italian case as a political and institutional laboratory of the commons represents another defining feature of the book. Rooted in the tradition of subsidiarity and civic association inspired by the *Labsus* model, some of the experiences documented find institutional expression in collaboration pacts developed and experimented in Italian municipal regulations (Arena and Iaione, 2012).

Against this theoretical and institutional background, the volume examines a range of Italian urban contexts (Bologna, Rome, Turin, Arezzo, Reggio Emilia, Messina, Naples and Trentino-Alto Adige) offering a detailed map of urban commons practices across diverse themes: social centres, schools, cultural spaces, urban green areas, energy communities, and forms of urban citizenship. The choice to focus on a plural geography of *commoning* reveals how such practices assume different meanings depending on local political visions, available resources, and territorial vulnerabilities.

Bologna occupies a particularly important place in this geography, since it allows the authors to explore both municipal collaboration agreements and grassroots practices of urban reuse. The social centre *Lucha* in Bologna illustrates *commoning* as the care of an abandoned space transformed into a cultural and relational infrastructure. Another chapter focused on Bologna complements this perspective, by exploring institutionalised and municipal practices with particular attention to collaboration agreements and forms of shared governance.

The case of Rome offers a lens through which to examine experiences of self-governance and practices of urban reappropriation. The primary school Di Donato in Rome shows how a public service can be reconfigured as a space of culture and educational growth through the participation of parents, residents, and associations. At the same time, the example of Pionta Park in Arezzo — a medium-sized town in Tuscany — brings to light the slower and more fragile dimension of commons-building: not a given, but a process of symbolic and material reappropriation of a space marked by marginality and the need for regeneration.

Reggio Emilia addresses the theme of public administration and institutional co-design procedures, analysing the *Quartiere Bene Comune* program, promoted by the city that involve citizens in implementation and evaluation of urban regeneration and sustainability projects.

Turin introduces the role of artistic imagination and the ephemerality of commons. More conflictual experiences are also documented, as in Naples, an emblematic case of counter-hegemonic *commons* in which occupations and collective civic uses transform abandoned buildings into spaces of participation, mutualism, and democratic self-governance.

Hybrid forms also emerge, connected to energy communities, the ecological transition, and bottom-up experiences that claim spaces and provide services otherwise unmet by the state. Particularly, energy communities and environmental movements have emerged in recent years as significant sites of participatory governance linked to social justice and equity in renewable transitions (Burke and Stephens, 2018), raising questions about the redistribution of responsibilities between citizens and public institutions. From this perspective, the volume raises the critical question of whether these participatory experiences may substitute for state rather than complement it.

This plurality reveals that commons do not constitute a single model: they are plural, territorial and politically unstable practices, traversed by tensions between autonomy, institutionalisation, and organisational sustainability. In this sense, heterogeneity clarifies the very nature of commoning as a situated process of social production through which places are re-signified, rules are negotiated and collective capacities are gradually constituted.

On the one hand, there are practices that seek institutional recognition and operate within municipal regulatory frameworks; on the other, there are experiences that emerge from conflict, the reappropriation of common resources and a critique of the property – based model.

These two trajectories often intertwine, producing hybrid forms in which the antagonistic and institutional dimensions coexist. From this perspective, the volume dwells on the importance of the urban context as a constitutive dimension of *commoning*, a starting point for understanding the diverse needs of the community, inequalities, social infrastructures, and the conflictual power relations that cut across local contexts.

Ambivalence lies at the heart of the book, as collaborative governance is interrogated in all its contradictions. The analytical framework developed throughout the book foregrounds a critical question: to what extent does the shared responsibility of commons genuinely involve all parties and above all institutions? The volume's distinctive contribution lies in its sustained engagement with *commons* as practices that are simultaneously generative and precarious — capable of fostering care, citizenship, and social innovation, yet structurally exposed to institutionalisation, depoliticisation, and the gradual displacement of public responsibility onto civil society. The volume thus invites the reader to ask when collaboration produces genuine democratic participation and when, instead, it translates into cost externalisation, bureaucratisation, or cooptation.

The editorial project of this volume is particularly significant because it restores the complexity of Italian commons as a terrain of political and social experimentation, revealing care as a fragile, conflictual and situated process. In doing so, the authors highlight innovative practices of participation, illuminating a model capable of redefining the relationships between citizens, institutions and territories, from which both institutional dependencies and participatory asymmetries emerge. Looking to the future, the book leaves open some questions for reflection. What forms of governance enable urban commons to take root over time without losing their critical and transformative capacity? How can grassroots-driven practices of care and participation help strengthen public policies without replacing them?

The volume's enduring value lies in its capacity to resist both the idealisation of commons and their reduction to participatory rhetoric, maintaining throughout a clear-eyed awareness of the permanent tension between transformation and normalisation.

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