Social Movement Studies

Mutual aid and solidarity politics in times of emergency: direct social action and temporality in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

From the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing measures introduced created a series of social problems and needs that were partially addressed in Italy as well as in other countries by grassroots mutual aid initiatives. This article analyses these initiatives as direct social actions: actions that do not primarily focus on claiming something from the state or other power holders, but instead on directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself. The article addresses the impact of the temporality of emergency on solidarity politics by employing a series of qualitative interviews and choosing to place the analysis of mutual aid initiatives that developed in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic in longer pathways of engagement in direct social action. While many of these initiatives were strongly rooted in the Italian social movement and civil society landscape and the choice to engage in mutual aid activities was the result of long years of reflection and planning, the article shows how strongly the temporality of emergency affected the nature of these initiatives, their development and their outcomes, in particular with regard to the extraordinary number of people who volunteered and their relationship with politicisation processes. Through this analysis, the article aims to contribute to the understanding of a crucial form of action and the influence of exceptional contexts on collective action.

From the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic and the social distancing measures imposed by the Italian government in order to stop the spread of the virus created a series of social problems and needs: access to shops and pharmacies for people at risk; childcare for working families who could not rely on schools; poverty and unemployment; psychological issues due to the prolonged isolation; domestic violence; difficulties in paying rent and bills, and so on. The Italian public welfare system, structurally weakened by decades of welfare retrenchment, and particularly under stress in the context of a massive health crisis and the subsequent economic crisis, was only partially able to answer these social problems and needs. A significant role was played by civil society through a series

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of grassroots solidarity initiatives that involved a wide range of actors, from established NGOs through radical political groups to ad-hoc networks of individual citizens.

This is not an isolated case; mutual aid experiences developed in several countries all across the world in 2020 and 2021, attracting media and scholarly attention. This article aims to shed light on this phenomenon, interpreting it from the point of view of social movement studies. On the one hand, such experiences emerged to address material needs, while on the other hand they allowed people to stay together and to express their need for action in a context in which not only were normal political activities made impossible by social distancing, but also one in which the tragedy of the pandemic made people feel impotent in that they lacked any control over reality and any way of shaping it.

These aspects have been treated by a significant strand of research within social psychology that has focused on the way in which individuals dealt with threats and anxieties in the pandemic context (Reiss et al., 2020), on fostering community solidarity when facing emergencies and natural disasters (Elcheroth & Drury, 2020) and on the role of collective action in such processes. In particular, scholars have pointed out that not only within the scope of certain social environments can facing an emergency situation together foster the creation of interpersonal connections and shared belongings, but also that solidarity-oriented action can help in dealing with threats and adversity (Politi et al., 2021; Vollhardt & Staub, 2011). The study of collective action can bring to the fore a series of factors that tend to escape other analyses, such as the role of long-standing trajectories of activism, the difference between various forms and degrees of action and the strategy-oriented and agency-based components of solidarity action.

This is related to what we know about direct social actions (DSAs): actions that do not primarily focus on claiming something from the state or other power holders, but that instead focus on directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself (Bosi & Zamponi, 2015, 2020). In the last few years, a significant amount of research has focused on boycotts, solidarity action, political consumerism, alternative finance, purchasing groups, occupations, self-management, free legal advice and medical services, to mention just a few. In particular, research conducted in the context of the economic crisis and the long summer of migration has observed two mechanisms: first, a strong change in the socio-economic context that is perceived as an emergency, favours the adoption of such practices; second, the interaction between the change in the context, as it is perceived, interpreted and appropriated by actors, and the actors' own character-istics, in terms of both identity and organisation, pushes actors that employ DSAs to follow different paths and to attach different meanings to their actions. Different inter-pretations of such emergencies result in different understandings of the relationship between politics and society and, thus, in different attitudes towards politicisation. Furthermore, this line of analysis offers the opportunity to put to a critical test the interpretation of solidarity initiatives as spontaneous occurrences of social resilience whose emergence and trajectory is completely determined by the emergency that triggers them.

The pandemic offers a unique chance to analyse the development of DSAs in a context that presents even stronger characteristics of emergency than the contexts in which previous studies were situated. How did the temporality of emergency affect DSA-based initiatives during the pandemic? This article aims to answer this question, focusing

on three main levels of analysis: To what extent do DSAs emerge as a systemic response to emergencies and to what extent are they, instead, embedded in actors' long-term trajectories? How are communities of people that have not previously been mobilised, that is, volunteers and beneficiaries, involved in DSAs within an emergency context, and what kinds of relationships are established with them? What are the consequences of the experience of emergency-based action in the aftermath of DSA-based initiatives, in particular with regard to politicisation processes?

Theoretical background

The pandemic has sparked significant interest within social science in general, and in particular among scholars investigating collective action. A first wave of research on how the pandemic was affecting the realm of grassroots politics has emerged (Bringel & Pleyers, 2020), focusing in particular on the development of street protest vis-à-vis the health-based legal and emotional limitations imposed by COVID-19 (Bosi & Lavizzari, 2023; della Porta, 2021; Kowalewski, 2021; Pressman & Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2021; Tassinari et al., 2020; Zajak et al., 2021). Research has indicated that solidarity action was one of the main ways in which movements operated during the pandemic (Pleyers, 2020b). The visible presence of grassroots networks of solidarity and mutual aid during the healthcare emergency has been reported by researchers across a wide variety of countries (Pleyers, 2020a; Sitrin & Sembrar, 2020), including the UK, (Chevée, 2022), Canada (Wood, 2020), Brazil (Abers et al., 2021) and Germany (Fiedlschuster & Riechle, 2020), among others.

Interestingly enough, this wave of research has brought back to the fore the concept of 'mutual aid', which especially in the UK and the US is strongly rooted in the anarchist tradition (Preston & Firth, 2020; Spade, 2020), while previous research on similar forms of action in the context of the economic crisis preferred concepts such as alternative economic practices (Castells et al., 2012), alternative forms of resilience (Kousis & Paschou, 2017) and DSAs (Bosi & Zamponi, 2020). Similar forms of action were analysed in the context of the long summer of migration through such concepts as welcome culture (Hamann & Karakayali, 2016), DSA (Zamponi, 2017), volunteering (Maestri & Monforte, 2020) and solidarity (Fleischmann, 2020). These pieces of research are situated within a developing strand of scholarship focusing on the emergence of politically meaningful activism outside the arena of traditional social movements in which people 'construct hybrid – "in-between" – forms of engagement in which compassionate action is mixed with social and critical resilience based on collective empowerment processes' (Monforte, 2020, p. 110).

From this point of view, what the economic crisis and the long summer of migration had in common was their interpretation as emergencies by the actors involved in DSAs, that is, as exceptional temporal contexts, phases of time in which everyday life is somehow suspended and a new temporality characterised by exceptional conditions and needs comes into being. As we know, crises and emergencies are socially constructed (Coleman, 2013), imposing a legal and social framework that disrupts the ordinary mechanisms of democratic societies (Greene, 2020). Furthermore, emergencies require urgent and concrete action here and now, and this need for urgency and concreteness strongly resonates with the materialisation of collective action that DSA embodies. Social theorists have observed that 'what characterises emergency is a simultaneous sense of a time outside of

what is recognised and felt as everyday time (exceptionality), of a hopeful time for action, where the materialisation of damage is temporarily suspended (omnipresent present and interval)' (Anderson, 2017, p. 14). In this strand of research, an emergency is interpreted as a 'model of eventfulness' (Anderson, 2016), which contrasts with the eternally self-reproducing present of the neoliberal timescape, in which the future's potential to become otherwise has been lost (Fisher, 2014). The temporality of emergency has been often analysed in the context of studies on humanitarian action (Brun, 2016; Compton, 2020), with an emergency treated as a sudden, unpredictable event that unfolds against a background of perceived normality, an event which causes widespread suffering or danger and demands an urgent response (Calhoun, 2010), deploying an imaginary that tends to obscure long-term processes and conflicts, encouraging faith in short-term technical solutions that bring things back to 'normal' as soon as possible (Calhoun, 2004). Ticktin (2016, p. 262) defines the temporality of emergency as a 'temporal perspective [in which] there is no way to understand events in a larger historical context, no time to think of the past or plan for the future: humanitarianism frames events as sudden and unpredictable'. Vandevoordt and Fleischmann (2021), reflecting on the temporal dilemma that humanitarian emergencies pose to activists interested both in mitigating the emergency in the present and in promoting political change in the future, identified three strategies developed by activists to address this dilemma: embedding political contestation in the present-oriented emergency-mitigating activities; rescaling policy demands made to local government; and interpreting humanitarian action as a prefiguration of political change.

The growing interest in issues of temporality that characterises social movement studies (Gillan & Edwards, 2020; McAdam & Sewell, 2001) has not brought systematic attention to the role of the temporality of emergency in collective action. The literature shows mobilisation as associated with moments of exceptionality, which escaping the time of everyday life favour cognitive liberation (McAdam, 1982), as well as with the narratives of exceptionality that are constructed around such moments (Polletta, 2006), but in general tends to focus on longer timeframes, such as cycles of protest (Tarrow, 1994), epochs of contention (McAdam & Sewell, 2001) or timescapes (Gillan, 2020). Research has addressed movements' own capacity to produce events and critical junctures (della Porta, 2008, 2020), without reflecting on how they react to external shocks. This article aims to analyse the development of DSA within a context that was almost universally interpreted as an emergency, that is, the COVID-19 pandemic, and intends to assess the impact of the pandemic on DSA-based initiatives within this context.

Case study and methods

The findings presented in this article are based on 17 semi-structured interviews (Blee & Taylor, 2002) conducted with representatives of 13 collective actors engaged in DSA during the pandemic in Italy (see Appendix). These actors were selected with the aim of achieving variation, both in terms of the socio-geographical area of the country and the social and political background. In geographical terms, seven of the actors are situated in the northern part of the country (in particular the cities of Milan, Bologna and Padua), three in the centre (Rome and Florence) and three in the south (Naples and Palermo). From the point of view of their social and political background, the actors can be divided

into three main categories. Six of them are *pre-existing social organisations or networks*: NGOs like ActionAid; a local chapter of the anti-mafia platform Libera; the community network SOS Ballarò (connecting social organisations in a Palermo neighbourhood); a student-based ARCI[1] club in Milan; a mutualistic association in Florence (Fòrimercato); and Nonna Roma, a solidarity association focusing on providing food for those in need in the capital. The three latter groups share a leftist background, while the former three have no explicit political leaning. These actors are committed to promoting solidarity and community empowerment, and adapted their action to the pandemic context within this framework, while having different views on the perspective of politicisation.

Another three actors belong to a second group, that of *radical left actors*: the Florentine branch of radical left party Potere al Popolo (PAP); a Padua-based collective, which is also part of PAP; and the Milanese social centre Rimake. These actors have mainly politically oriented goals and have long invested in mutual aid as a strategy for reconstructing the social solidarity links that constitute the pre-political bases for political mobilisation. They faced the pandemic with this attitude and these goals.

Finally, four actors belong a third group, that is, *ad-hoc initiatives* that were born in response to the pandemic: Padova Noi Ci Siamo, organised by a coordination of volunteering associations in Padua in collaboration with the municipality and the catholic diocese; Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza, launched in Milan by a group of radical autonomous activists in cooperation with the NGO Emergency; Don't Panic – Organizziamoci, launched in Bologna by a student-based ARCI club in collaboration with several local associations; and All You Can Care, launched in Padua by a social centre in collaboration with other movement-related groups. This latter group is somewhat heterogeneous, with Padova Noi Ci Siamo being exclusively socially oriented, All You Can Care being made up completely of political movement groups and Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza and Don't Panic – Organizziamoci being characterised by a hybrid composition.

Whereas in most cases the collective actors were identified directly by the author, in other cases they were proposed by the respondents themselves, following a snowball strategy. The people who were interviewed had significant roles within each actor, although not always at the leadership level. In any case, they were selected for their capacity to provide information and for their representative role within the collective actors. In most cases, interviewees were part of the core activist group that started the initiatives, although in a few cases (I6, I13, I14, I15) they joined as volunteers during the emergency.[2] Six interviews were conducted in person, whereas 11 took place online. On average, the duration of each interview was about 50 minutes. At the outset of each interview, the nature and purpose of the study were explained and respondents were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research. Then, I asked a series of broad and open questions aimed at reconstructing the development of the different initiatives. In particular, interviewees were asked to elaborate on the following: the initial choice to act through DSA vis-à-vis the COVID-19 emergency; the nature of the activities and their purposes; the involvement of volunteers; the development of activities and commitment over time; the relationship with beneficiaries; the relationship between DSA and claim-based forms of action; and the continuity of action beyond the healthcare emergency. Anonymity was granted to individual activists, while acknowledging the role of collective

actors. The timeframe of processes discussed in the interviews was from the beginning of the emergency in Italy (late February/early March 2020) to the date of the interview. Furthermore, the interviews were supplemented with documentary sources (print and digital material produced by the actors), providing background material that informed the analysis.

DSA in the COVID-19 pandemic: solidarity and emergency

"This is what we do": continuity and change in context

The idea that mutual aid initiatives emerged out of nowhere from a spontaneous process of societal resilience vis-à-vis the COVID-19 emergency is far from the reality described by the representatives of these initiatives. As we will see, massive numbers of volunteers did emerge through individual pathways of activation in the emergency context, but they embedded their engagement within existing structures. When asked to tell the story of how the initiatives started, many interviewees began with describing how they adapted their pre-existing solidarity work to the changed context, as in the case of an activist from a Milanese social centre:

> We have simply reconfigured online and on an accelerated rhythm the work we were already doing [. . .]. Thus, when the emergency started, we simply thought to reorganise everything based on the fact we were staying home and we could organise a way to answer the different emergency points. (I4)

'Things came by themselves' recalled an activist from a long-standing mutual aid group based in Florence (I3). A vast number of collective actors had been engaging in DSA for a long time before the pandemic. The implementation of social distancing measures put them in a changed context and they were faced with the challenge of reshaping their already established forms of DSA. This experience was confirmed by the vast majority of interviewees. When describing the origin of their All You Can Care initiative in Padua, an activist explained: 'The project was born out of already existing services' (I7). This continuity is not limited to the forms of action themselves but also applies to motivations that are rooted in long-term trajectories of reflection on the relationship between the social and political spheres. When asked about the choice to invest in mutual aid in the context of COVID-19, a representative of a Padua-based collective affiliated to PAP did not focus on the pandemic and the needs it suddenly created, but instead described the long-term political theorisation in relation to mutual aid that his organisation had developed:

> This choice was the consequence of a political reflection we developed at the national level, according to which mutual aid is one of the pillars on which the PAP project is based. Thus, starting from the assumption [. . .] that to do politics today you need to be internal to the popular classes, and that this can be achieved also through forms of mutual aid, we started this. (I8)

Thus, according to activists, on the one hand, mutual aid experiences were started because they were what activists were already doing or, what they had planned to use in a process of reconnecting with their constituencies; on the other hand, these forms of action reflected the actors' self-perceived identity in a changed context, that is, their

attempt to interpret the role they attributed to themselves in a context in which the ordinary way of doing politics was suspended. An activist from a student-based ARCI club in Milan, which was among the initiators of the AiutARCI project, described the latter process in a particularly clear way:

> Initially, the first thing we thought to do, as soon as things started to happen, was ask ourselves: "If your role in society is to make sociality, in a moment in which this cannot be done, what do you do?" So, as a first thing, we tried to move all our activities online. Then, the problem of [grocery] shopping, in particular for vulnerable subjects, was evident to everyone. Here, supermarkets did not succeed in satisfying requests for delivery. Thus, together with ARCI, we started thinking about how to do this thing. (I5)

Continuity does not mean absence of change. Activists made choices based on the activities they already undertook and on the long-term political theorisation on the centrality of mutual aid, but those choices were also strongly influenced by the sudden change in context. Actors did not automatically reproduce what they had previously done, but rather tried to reflect on the best way to reshape it in a changed context, something that required innovation in terms of practices and attitude. In Bologna, for example, a student-based ARCI club launched a mutual aid initiative called Don't Panic – Organizziamoci that involved both other associations and individual volunteers:

> The idea was: "Let's try to understand […] what is the way in which we can be useful at this moment." […] The first thing that came to mind was "Let's put in place an enlargement mechanism. We are not enough to bring any relief in this phase." Evidently, that mechanism of enlargement and therefore of organising, extending our reach to the area of volunteering, worked, arriving at 400 volunteers, initially on a single project, which was that of the collection and distribution of basic necessities. (I10)

As this activist recalled, the idea of mutual aid was already there, but the change in the context pushed the activists to scale these up, extending beyond the limits of politicised movement areas, and involving the world of volunteering, both in terms of organisations and individuals. A similar pathway was followed in Milan by a small group of activists belonging to the area of post-autonomous social centres who started the Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza together with an established healthcare-focused NGO, Emergency, and the support of the municipality (I6).

Reaching new communities: volunteers and beneficiaries

The immediate consequence of launching mutual aid initiatives was the connection between activists and a new community of people: volunteers. Activists testify to an immediate and unprecedented explosion in the number of volunteers contacting them and making themselves available for mutual aid:

> The level of volunteering exploded. We went more or less from 50 volunteers to 200 volunteers every weekend during the lockdown. […] The jump in terms of numbers, of activation of people, was the most important thing I saw. (I1).

> A lot of people external to our group got active. If we considered the five years in which this space was open, it was the moment at which of greatest number of people became involved. (I9)

The word 'volunteers' is often used by interviewees to identify the people that joined their initiatives to lend a hand within the emergency context, distinguishing them from long-term group members who are also engaged in the political component of the initiative. Taking this descriptive categorisation and applying it to the analysis implies reflecting on what makes someone a volunteer instead of an activist. Generally speaking, volunteers came from outside the groups that started the initiatives, although from similar milieus. The main difference has little to do with political stance, for example, activists being more left-wing than volunteers. Rather, what seems to be in play here is first and foremost the temporality of the engagement; in fact, during the emergency, both activists and volunteers were doing the same activities: fulfilling the people's material needs. What distinguished them was the fact that the activists were there before, when, outside of the emergency context, the actors were focusing on more overtly political activities, and will be there after the end of the emergency, when it is suggested claim-making will come back to the fore. As we will see, the idea of making volunteers into activists, so politicising their engagement, coincides with the attempt to keep them engaged after the end of the emergency.

Milan, being both the second largest cities in the country and one of the global epicentres of the pandemic (in Lombardy more than 45,000 people died of COVID-19, one quarter of the national count; 6.4 out of every 1,000 victims in the world were in Lombardy),[3] was particularly active in mobilising volunteers for mutual aid initiatives. An activist from Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza mentioned 'hundreds of people' (I6), while an AiutARCI activist told me:

> People showed up immediately. As soon as we started looking, people immediately came in droves. It was the period in which everybody had to stay home, so there wasn't anything else to do, and a lot of kids, but also slightly older people, people that were not working at that moment and that, even if it was all volunteering, made themselves available. (I5)

The reference to the fact that people showed up because 'there wasn't anything else to do' came up in several interviews. The emergency context affected the way in which most people lived, creating an untapped potential for activation. The temporality of emergency completely restructured most people's schedules. Suspending everyday life created the conditions for reflection, as a Florence-based activist recalled:

> When the world stopped, perhaps even the fact of standing still and thinking has brought us back to the important things in life, beyond the frenzy of everyday life. (I3)

Suddenly, people had nothing else to do. The suspension of the everyday work schedule liberated a lot of time, allowing people to think about how to spend it. Furthermore, the first few weeks of the pandemic were dominated by a sense of fear, impotence and a lack of control over what was happening. Getting active and volunteering was a way out of these feelings, as a Milan-based activist described:

> For some it was also a way to get out of the house and be able to do it with meaning. Maybe to avoid fear, have legitimacy or anyway to make sense of going out. (I4)

This dynamic is not limited to volunteers; it involved activists themselves, that is, people who were primarily motivated by political reasons, but who still went through similar

emotional processes to the ones volunteers encountered: having free time and feeling morally compelled to spend it somehow:

> We couldn't organise shifts because we had too many people, because it was the only thing you could do, since all the precarious jobs were interrupted. I worked in a cooperative, doing afterschool at primary schools, two hours a day [. . .], then it was interrupted and I thought: "OK, what the fuck do I do?" (I7)

This escape from the *horror vacui* of the temporality of the pandemic emergency, from the anguish of sitting on the couch waiting for the daily bulletin of victims, had an impact on activists, who found solace, grounding and sociability in times in which these feelings were pretty rare. An activist from a social centre in Milan talked explicitly about mutual aid as therapy for activists:

> For me, subjectively, it was my therapy for the pandemic. [. . .] At a time when there was this rampant fear of death, to get back in touch with vitality [. . .] It was very tiring but it allowed me to stay in close contact with my resources, not to let myself be eaten by anguish, fear, depression. I was very lively, in the morning I started and the more I could stay in this thing, the more I actually felt good. (I4)

Once again, there is probably a Milanese peculiarity in this feeling of dread that characterised the area of the country most violently hit by the pandemic. Volunteering meant being on the other side of this feeling, being active, exercising some moral control over what was going on. Without denying the emotional burden of certain aspects of social work, activists tend to stress feelings of joy, enjoyment and moral energy, as in the case of another Milan-based activist:

> This was the climate: nobody around, people staying home and being afraid. [. . .] The city was completely empty, we were the angels sent from heaven, the climate was "We can do it", "Everything is going to be all right", "Let's commit everyone to doing something." (I5)

As we have seen, the same temporality of emergency that favoured the emergence of DSAs also threatened the actors' capacity for planning such actions. The urgent rhythm of emergency pushed activists to address the needs they thought were there, based on their presumptions about the nature of the emergency. The pandemic was interpreted as a healthcare emergency, so the needs to be addressed were supposed to be those directly connected with healthcare. The experience of DSA brought activists to realise that the indirect economic effects of the pandemic were creating much more of a strain than the direct healthcare ones. Several interviewees, notwithstanding the differences in geographical and political terms, told me a very similar story about this realisation that poverty was a much bigger problem than getting out of the house:

> Then we realised that the problem was only in part delivering the groceries, because it was becoming something else: being able to afford to buy them. (I3).

> We realised that things were getting worse for people that were not working. [. . .] They stayed home and they did not even have the bare minimum to buy food. [. . .] As soon as we realised that, we immediately said: "OK, let's start preparing packages." (I5)

This realisation shows how a change of context, and in particular an emergency, produces consequences for social actors insofar as it is interpreted and appropriated as such. The 'healthcare emergency' frame pushed actors to choose certain practices, and it

was only when they interpreted and appropriated the pandemic as an economic emergency that other pathways opened. Furthermore, it points out the effect of the temporality of emergency on the actors' capacity to assess the situation effectively and plan their actions. The immediate nature of needs and the moral urgency to respond call for a rhythm that does not allow for critical reflection and, thus, significant elements of the emergency itself (such as its economic component) may go overlooked for some time. Finally, in that it implies a broadening of the community networks in which the collective actors were placed, DSA gave them the opportunity to access different spheres of social reality than those in which they usually intervened. It was because actors chose to make themselves available for delivering groceries they had the chance to learn that behind the healthcare layer of the emergency there was an economic one.

Continuity beyond the emergency and politicisation

The experience of DSA during the pandemic had an impact on collective actors at three levels: it reinforced the centrality of DSA in the actors' agenda, building on pre-existing experiences and elaborations based on the economic crisis and on feminism; it broadened the actors' reach in certain sectors of society, strengthening their knowledge about such issues as poverty and inequalities; and it widened the actors' networks because of the recruitment of a large number of volunteers, whose pathways towards politicisation are complex and ongoing.

First, regarding the content and practice of collective actors' undertakings, the theoretical and practical role of mutual aid activities and DSA was strengthened. As we have seen, actors that engaged in DSA during the pandemic did so following long-standing pathways. In hindsight, people think about what has happened since March 2020 as a confirmation of the pathway they had previously chosen, as is the case of a Bologna-based activist:

> For us, Don't Panic has reinforced an idea that we already had before [...]: to implement processes in which we have made ourselves available to others, also providing elements of leadership, broadening our action to whatever the city made available. (I10)

The emergency put to the test many of the ideas and practices that had been circulating for a long time. In particular, ideas and practices with regard to the centrality of mutual aid, and with regard to DSA as a hybrid form of action between politics and volunteering, able to capture the will to act without being part of a political collective (Bosi & Zamponi, 2020), found common ground with the feminist theorisations about the politics of care, about the latter's contradictory role in contemporary capitalism and about the transformational potential of care practices (Fraser, 2016; The Care Collective, 2020), favoured, in times of pandemic, by the fact that the Italian word *cura* means both 'care' and 'cure'. The aforementioned Bologna-based activist described as follows the assembly they organised in June 2021 with the activists and volunteers with whom they shared DSA initiatives during the pandemic:

> It is not by chance that we have titled this assembly "A revolution will cure us": an assembly with different actors in the city in which to say, essentially, that [...] we are interested in defining a political perspective for the next 10 years. [...] For us it is the politics of care versus the politics of profit. (I10)

On the one hand, these are long-standing trajectories, rooted in the DSA experiences developed during the economic crisis and in fourth-wave feminism. On the other hand, it was the experience of mutual aid initiatives during the pandemic that provided them with a chance of becoming central elements in the actors' discourse and practice. This visible step forward on a previously existing pathway is very clearly described by an activist from a social centre in Padua:

> Before I didn't do it that much. [...] I wasn't so focused on mutual aid. In my opinion, the pandemic has had a psychological impact on those who had already done something before, and maybe it has even woken up a little bit those who did shit all. We have been thinking about it over the past two years. We are integrating some transfeminist thought, some elaboration on the issue of "care", and either you do these things, or you just talk; we are a community that tends to do. (I7)

People had been 'thinking about it over the past two years', 'it' being the centrality of DSA, strengthened by the feminist elaboration on the politics of care, but only the emergency brought these issues front and centre in the social reality in which these actors are placed. A Milan-based activist also testifies to the transition between talk and practice in the following words:

> There has been a general change both in the composition and in the way of doing politics. Before, mutualism was something we talked about and that guided our political action, but now mutualism and care have become the two keywords of doing politics for us. Our very way of doing politics has changed, because now practice is the prism through which we read what is happening. (I4)

The broadening of the community networks both in terms of volunteers and beneficiaries that was described in the previous sections had a significant impact on the actors' capacity to produce knowledge about the social context in which they were placed. Several activists, when asked about what they took away from this phase, mentioned knowledge and learning as a significant element. An activist of SOS Ballarò describes this process very effectively:

> Surely it allowed us to reflect, and also to get closer to a social fabric that we knew but obviously not so well. That is, we went right into people's homes, we began to know in more detail at least a little even about the most bureaucratic part of certain problems, about [basic] income, about the accessibility to some services. (I11)

Through the process of establishing structural links with low-income sectors of society, activists developed a clearer understanding of the limits of welfare provision, the role of bureaucracy, and so on. Through the materialisation of politics that DSA implies, this dynamic involves shifting from a broad ideological understanding of inequalities to learning the concrete minutiae, the details of social policies, and so on, as explained by a Florentine representative of PAP:

> We have learned a lot. [...] We had to talk to social workers, we had to study the rules by which the municipality tried to distribute the shopping vouchers, we saw how funds were distributed by the state to the municipalities. There was a lot of studying, which has allowed us to see better what are the holes, the flaws in the state machine, because objectively we come from a part of the left that is very ideological and actually knows very little about the problems and how decisions are made. (I2)

Finally, this extension of the actors' reach in a time of emergency has affected the composition of the collective actors themselves through the recruitment of volunteers. As was the case regarding the relationship with beneficiaries, the involvement of volunteers is also seen as a way of overcoming the separation between activists and the rest of the world: 'the only real and widespread channel [...] to involve people outside our circles' (I10). In the transition towards a time of normality, some of these volunteers ended up joining the collective actors as fully fledged activists, significantly changing the composition of the former. An example is provided by a Milanese social centre, whose change in composition is described as follows:

> Until the year before, with the new ones arriving, I always felt there was a gap between us, but this year I don't feel it. [...] Doing politics with those we in militant circles define as "normal people" was good for me. This barrier has fallen a little for me, because these are exactly the people who are now part of my assembly, and this also changes my way of doing politics. (I4)

Overcoming the barrier separating politicised activists from 'normal people' has been one of the long-term goals of collective actors engaging in DSA for quite some time. In the context of the economic crisis, DSA was interpreted as a way of opening up the access to political collectives and forming broader communities based on shared needs and material experiences that in turn were expected to undergo a process of politicisation. Here, we see the description of some partial results of such a process, with beneficiaries playing a limited role (their direct involvement as activists is reported as sporadic by interviewees) but with volunteers playing a much more significant role. The persistent presence of the volunteers who were recruited in the midst of the emergency should not be taken for granted. Their participation was mostly developed in a context of emergency and did not survive the end of that emergency; when normality returns, the change of temporality implies a change in availability. People had to go back to work, and in any case, the moral charge of solidarity work rapidly fizzled out as soon as the temporality of emergency seemed to fade. Activists are well aware of this tendency and, thus, started planning in advance for this eventuality, as a Florence-based activist testifies:

> We were already aware that large numbers of people would return to their homes, but that something could remain, and that therefore it was right to start organising. (I3)

For this reason, many activists started in advance to organise assemblies and activities meant to gradually encourage a transition from ephemeral volunteer activation in times of emergency to politicised commitment in times of normality (I1, I4, I7, I10, among others). Activists are adamant in stating that the attempts to create pathways towards politicisation were successful only with a minority of volunteers, and usually went in the direction of creating an area of sympathisers, rather than recruiting activists. In June 2020, the Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza in Milan contributed to organising protest events against the regional government regarding the management of the pandemic. The degree of involvement in such process reflected the previous political experience of individuals, but a certain activation did take place, as one of the activists testifies:

> Clearly those who participated in building the demonstrations were those leading the Brigate, therefore people who were already politically structured. [...] In any case, you

have kindled a little conscience in many people. That is, now some kids who may have been part of the Brigate, now they are doing their own business, but if there is a demonstration I see them, they participate. (I6)

For the vast majority of volunteers, their engagement was indeed strongly influenced by the temporality of emergency and, thus, constrained within the limits of such an emergency. An activist from AiutARCI in Milan stated that 'most of them disappeared, we didn't manage to involve them on anything else. [...] The thing was: I do this until I to go back to my normal life, stuff restarts, everything restarts' (I5). The commitment of volunteers was strictly linked with the suspension of normal life that the temporality of emergency entailed. As soon as it was over, going back to normal implied going back to a life without social action. Similar processes are described by activists belonging to social organisations for whom the transition from volunteering to activism does not imply a radical politicisation, but is characterised by the same issues. An activist from an anti-mafia network in Naples sums up the outcomes of their activities after the emergency as follows:

> It has become less constant, it has become an ordinary action. Not everything has continued. [...] I have understood that, if activated, people are capable of actions far beyond their reach. The solidarity drive [...] is an important, structured thing that can change people's lives. [...] The lockdown has changed us, made us realise even more: a piece of the third sector has been killed, others who were doing a certain amount of things now do even more. It has created contexts of action that still continue. (I16)

Activist are aware of the fact that there are degrees and forms of participation, and try to handle with care the issue of balancing the need to involve as many people as possible with the goal of politicising their action and avoid being transformed into depoliticised service providers. Those that have been involved in DSA for a long time, as in the case of Nonna Roma, are used to facing this issue. In May 2020, as soon as the first restrictions were lifted, they organised a protest event in front of the city hall, demanding the local government provide food for those in need. Only a minority of volunteers joined in:

> The mobilisation proposal is perceived with interest only to a certain extent, to 30% of the volunteers, in the sense of following it and making a contribution. [...] Today, proposing such things means to involve only a vanguard. However, I am convinced that it is right to do it, not only because otherwise we end up doing another job, if we fail to build the elements of political criticism, but also because the more you do it the more, slowly, that 30% becomes 31 and 32. [...] For some people, Nonna Roma is an association that lends you a hand, for others a place where they can activate themselves to meet nice people, lend a hand to people because it is right, for others it is also a tool for doing politics, for being militant. [...] I think we must be inclusive, but there is an objective difference. Some of us feel like comrades, so that is an experience that is to do with the need for a transformation of the present; for others it is about playing a small part in this unjust world, because it is right. We must keep everyone inside; however, we must know that there is a difference. (I1)

These final quote shows an elaboration that goes well beyond the temporality of emergency, indicating the complexity of the politicisation processes from a long-term perspective in that there is a need to balance reach and identity, inclusiveness and resistance to cooptation. DSA is the common ground between people who aim for societal transformation and people who want to do what is right, as the activist said. On the one hand,

the emergency created favourable conditions for many people to share this ground; on the other hand, it created obstacles in the pathways to politicisation.

Discussion and conclusions

This section will assess the ways in which the temporality of emergency affected DSA-based initiatives during the pandemic, focusing on the three levels of analysis that were chosen: the relationship between the emergency context of the pandemic and the long-term trajectories of actors; the relationship between activists and the broader communities of volunteers and beneficiaries with whom they interacted during the emergency; and the consequences of the experience of pandemic-related action in the aftermath of DSA-based initiatives.

Regarding the first point, there are visible continuities between mutual aid initiatives and what some collective actors in the Italian social movement landscape had been discussing and doing for a long time. Such initiatives were launched because for years there had been a background of producing ideas and practices about mutual aid and DSA, rather than embodying the spontaneous resilience of society in the face of an experience of hardship. These initiatives were not created out of nowhere and their nature cannot be understood if we look at them as ephemeral occurrences of social resilience, spontaneously emerging in times of emergency and ready to disappear as soon as the temporality of 'normality' comes back. Many of these initiatives were strongly rooted in the Italian social movement and civil society landscape and the choice to engage in mutual aid activities as a reaction to the pandemic, although strongly characterised by the sudden emergence of previously unengaged volunteers, was not an automatic response of individuals aiming to embody the impersonal resilience of Italian society, but rather the result of years of reflection and preparation. As unexpected as the pandemic was, the focus of a significant part of Italian civil society for a long time had been on opposing social disintegration.

Regarding the second point, the temporality of emergency allowed collective actors to broaden their network to two different social groups: on the one hand, volunteers who joined mutual aid initiatives without prior engagement because they had time available, because they experienced moral energy and because such participation gave them a feeling of control over what was happening; on the other hand, the beneficiaries of the aid, who opened activists' eyes to a different realm of reality, changing even the notion of what the emergency was, from an early focus on the healthcare component to the realisation of an economic layer of needs behind it. The temporality of emergency has specific characteristics that through the suspension of everyday life and activities foster biographical availability, and through the moral sense of urgency and immediacy create opportunities for the massive involvement of volunteers who have not previously been mobilised in both newly formed and pre-existing DSA-based initiatives. Furthermore, such a phase of high-intensity commitment and blurring of the boundaries between activist milieus and other communities favours learning processes that foster collective actors' development of a deeper knowledge of the environment in which they are placed. This finding strongly resonates with the extant literature on movement knowledge (Eyerman & Jamison, 1989), in particular regarding the capacity of grassroots actors to 'produce knowledge from below, information about society which is inconvenient to and

resisted by those above' (Cox & Flesher Fominaya, 2009, p. 1), translating their social and local rootedness within specific communities (Chesters, 2012) into the construction of alternative epistemologies (della Porta & Pavan, 2017).

Regarding the third point, the experience of DSA during the pandemic had an impact on collective actors, reinforcing the centrality of DSA in the actors' agenda, strengthening their knowledge and widening their network. The pathways towards politicisation or prolonged engagement of the new volunteers are complex: on the one hand, the emergency created favourable conditions for their recruitment; on the other hand, it constrained their availability to the limits of the emergency itself.

In contrast to a superficial reading of the first point, the analysis allows us to point out how strongly the temporality of emergency affected the nature of these initiatives, their development and their outcomes. It was exactly because of the emergency context in which they were placed that these initiatives were able to mobilise such a large number of people; yet, it was exactly because their commitment was so heavily affected by the emergency context that the pathways towards politicisation for these people were so complex. The temporality of emergency is clearly at work in favouring the massive involvement of volunteers at the beginning of the pandemic and their disappearance at its supposed end, thwarting their pathway towards politicisation. As the analysis shows, the difference between activists and volunteers is mainly interpreted through the lens of temporality: an activist is someone who was involved in these initiatives before the emergency and will be engaged in them after it; a volunteer is someone whose engagement is ephemeral and limited to the emergency. Consequently, the construction of pathways of continuity for social and political engagement after the emergency for volunteers is the primary strategy put in place to politicise them. Politicisation, from this point of view, coincides with being active beyond the emergency, when times of 'normality' return.

Broadly speaking, this article shows how the choice to analyse the mutual aid initiative emerging during the pandemic over a longer timeframe, taking into account the long-term processes that have encouraged actors to engage in DSA and that influence what they take home from it (as in the case of feminism and the politics of care), allows us to grasp the fundamental role that the temporality of emergency plays in shaping the way in which collective action develops and the role different actors play. The temporality of emergency created a distinct set of opportunities and threats for collective actors in that it had an impact on pre-existing pathways and accelerated certain dynamics within them, while changing the direction of others. Emergencies do reduce the space for participation and mobilisation (Greene, 2020), but the analysis conducted in this article shows that collective action tends to find its way, as testified by the huge numbers of volunteers who were active during the emergency. Nevertheless, the analysis shows that the incidental volunteerism of thousands of people has the potential to be mobilised by existing collective actors to bring about social change and long-term engagement in DSA, but only to a certain extent and in limited conditions. On the one hand, the hypotheses proposed by the literature on humanitarian action (Brun, 2016; Calhoun, 2004, 2010; Compton, 2020; Ticktin, 2016) that concern the role of the temporality of emergency in limiting the actors' capacities to think and plan beyond immediate solutions, hold also in the broader field of DSA-based initiatives. On the

other hand, the embeddedness of such initiatives in longer trajectories is what allows them to promote strategies to escape the trap of the temporality of emergency. The agency of actors can foster this politicisation, but a significant part of the action that emerged within an emergency context remains confined within its narrow scope. In times in which emergencies seem to be the main space for contention, in particular with regard to climate change, further research will be needed to investigate what contexts the findings of this study can be generalised to. In particular, research focused on the experience of volunteers who have not previously been engaged with collective actors may help in understanding the potential pathways to long-term engagement.

Notes

1. ARCI is a national cultural organisation constituted by thousands of local social and cultural clubs. It is politically independent, although generally inspired by left-wing ideals.
2. This imbalance between the number of activists and volunteers in the sample means that the point of view of core group activists is more strongly represented in the analysis than the experience of emergency-based volunteers. This is in line with the goal of the article, which is to investigate how the temporality of emergency had an impact on solidarity politics within the Italian social movement and civil society milieus.
3. Data retrieved from Lab24, the data platform of the newspaper *Il Sole 24 Ore*, https://lab24.ilsole24ore.com/coronavirus, last accessed 21 January 2023.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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Appendix: interviews

	Collective actor	City	Geographical area	Type of actor	Main activities within the pandemic context	Date	Mode
I1	Nonna Roma	Rome	Centre	Pre-existing social organisation	Distribution of food and basic goods; childcare; labour and administrative advice; housing advice; cultural and educational activities	10/27/2020	online
I2	Potere al Popolo Firenze	Florence	Centre	Radical left actor	Distribution of food and basic goods; labour and administrative advice	10/29/2020	online
I3	Fòrimercato	Florence	Centre	Pre-existing social organisation	Distribution of food and basic goods; self-managed food production	6/15/2021	in person
I4	Rimake	Milan	North	Radical left actor	Distribution of food and basic goods; childcare; labour and administrative advice; housing advice; psychological assistance; cultural and educational activities	6/16/2021	in person
I5	ARCI Milano – AiutARCI	Milan	North	Pre-existing social organisation	Distribution of food and basic goods	7/3/2021	online
I6, I12, I13, I14	Brigate Volontarie per l'Emergenza	Milan	North	Ad-hoc initiative	Distribution of food and basic goods; childcare; psychological assistance; educational and cultural activities	6/9/2021, 7/13/2021	online
I7	All You Can Care	Padua	North	Ad-hoc initiative	Distribution of food and basic goods; labour and administrative advice; housing advice; homeless assistance	6/18/2021	in person
I8, I9	Catai	Padua	North	Radical left actor	Distribution of food and basic goods; labour and administrative advice; homeless assistance	6/18/2021	in person
I10	Don't Panic – Organizziamoci	Bologna	North	Ad-hoc initiative	Distribution of food and basic goods; labour and administrative advice; psychological assistance; homeless assistance	7/3/2021	online
I11	SOS Ballarò	Palermo	South	Pre-existing social organisation	Distribution of food and basic goods; labour and administrative advice	7/7/2021	online
I15	Padova Noi Ci Siamo	Padua	North	Ad-hoc initiative	Distribution of food and basic goods	11/16/2021	in person

(Continued)

(Continued).

	Collective actor	City	Geographical area	Type of actor	Main activities within the pandemic context	Date	Mode
I16	Libera Campania	Naples	South	Pre-existing social organisation	Distribution of food and basic goods; psychological assistance; cultural and educational activities	1/27/2022	online
I17	ActionAid – Progetto SEEDS	Naples	South	Pre-existing social organisation	Distribution of food and basic goods	1/31/2022	online