After-school activism within the state school system and within the neighbourhood: the "Scuoletta" case study in San Lorenzo (Rome)

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Theoretical and Urban Premises

The dismantling of the "Public City" contrasts with the high expectations about the Urban Destiny and contributes to devise as "fractured" contemporary Global Cities, in which a basic duality of rich and poor, formal and informal, organized and disintegrated, ruled and unruled, separated and linked at the same time has been shown. Two decades of neo-liberal reforms, formal democratization, and globalizing urban modernity have caused nothing but disillusion for a great area of city residents that live in the so-called "Anti-City". Poverty, insecurity and exclusion are the main features by which the neo-liberal economic model deals with the performance and representation gap of the "real democracy" and with which it spreads high social costs among the lower sectors of the population.

Related to the above-mentioned scenario, the pandemic caused by the rapid spread of the Covid-19 virus as a "total social fact" has revealed some effects well beyond those linked to people's health. The epidemic has been changing our daily lives and our behaviour, and it is still causing a deep and far-reaching impact on the economic and political field. A closer look at the social, economic and political consequences of the pandemic suggests that these issues are not directly attributable to its epidemiological features, but they are instead shaped by the ways whereby national and local societies reacted to it. In the field of the state school system, for example, the "Distance Learning" that replaced classroom teaching during lockdown periods highlighted all the limitations of the neo-liberal reforms, which abandoned students belonging to the subaltern social classes and moulded a school suited to

the bourgeoisie. Faced with the paradox of a public school helping those who least need to be helped, some territories self-organise forms of resistance around basic needs: food, housing, health, schooling. In some cases, these activities take place in neighbourhoods that are undergoing a profound social and urban change, such as San Lorenzo district in Rome, where the subject of our research is located: the popular after-school called the "Scuoletta". This is where our socio-ethnographic investigation took place, by means of non-participant observation. In addition, six in-depth interviews were conducted between the popular educators and the neighbourhood inhabitants.

A Contentious Territory: the District of San Lorenzo in Rome

San Lorenzo is a neighbourhood of Rome with a very particular history. Since its construction, at the end of the 19th century, San Lorenzo was an "irregular" area, because it was not included in the Institutional Urban Plan of the City of Rome (in 1873). At first, it was intended as a destination for the former peasants who came from Southern Italy and the workers who erected the buildings in the Downtown. During Fascism it became the focus of the Resistance against Mussolini. Then, it endured a harsh bombing by the US Air Forces in July 1943, with almost two thousand dead, including several children. San Lorenzo was, in fact, located near the railway station ("Stazione Termini") and it was essential for the logistics of the fascist regime.

In the Seventies, San Lorenzo had an important role in the student and social protest, but then it has begun to be gentrified when the students of Sapienza University of Rome – located nearby – settled there. Rental prices started to increase sharply and the cost of living became unbearable for a large number of elderly residents, who were forced to move elsewhere. The neighbourhood suddenly changed, therefore: in the following years it has been structured along the lines of a "student economy", until another crisis has occurred, due to the lockdown and the closure of the University.

The Demographic Issue

Simone, the owner of "I Colli emiliani", one of the traditional inns in the neighbourhood, states: "Today, without the University, San Lorenzo district would not survive. Nearly all of our customers are university students. At lunchtime, we might have a few workers or office employees, but these are rare exceptions: the neighbourhoods has become depopulated of its long-term residents. Today, we only see students and

tourists; in fact, during the day the district is deserted because students are at university and tourists are in the city centre". Evidently, the demographic desertification of a given area implicates the role of the school system, which has long been a reliable indicator of the age structure of a population. Daniele, a waiter at "I Colli emiliani", explains: "I am 42 years born, and I was born in San Lorenzo. When I attended elementary school, the institute 'Saffi' had classes going up to section 'L'. Now my daughter attends the same school, but her class is in section 'A', and there are only two sections left, 'A' and 'B'. Children are no longer born in the neighbourhood because young couples can neither find apartments to rent nor afford to buy one. Apartments are turned into bed & breakfasts and hostels. Even university students struggle to find rental accommodations, as hosting tourists is more profitable". Between university students and tourists, the neighbourhood fills up with "temporary population" (Brollo 2024).

The Case-study of "Scuoletta" and the Solidarity Network within the District

In the neighbourhood, as in the wider city of Rome, the issue affecting schools is not only quantitative, but also qualitative. The reduction in public funding allocated to schools has diminished the quality of education, precisely at a historical moment when, due to rising immigration to Italy and the increasing number of children born to foreign parents, greater investment is required – especially to prepare teachers to manage the multi-ethnical composition of their classrooms, as school-age migrants children arrived in Italy in recent years have exacerbated overcrowding, compounded budget shortfall, forced teachers to grapple with language barriers, and inflamed social tensions in places unaccustomed to educating immigrants students.

San Lorenzo district, however, has a different history, compared to other areas in the city of Rome. Here, solidarity and mutual aid have a long tradition, which is expressed by a deep-rooted democratic and left-wing associationism. Since 2019, the "Scuoletta" has organised after-school and homework assistance for students in difficulty. The service is provided three afternoons a week and concerns primary, lower secondary school and higher secondary school students. There is an agreement between the association and the "official" educational institutions: the popular educators carry out their activities on the school premises, after school hours, and the teachers refer students who need help to the after-school. At the end of each after-school session, the classrooms are cleaned by both educators and students. The participants are aware of the established

schedule: playtime is from 4:30 to 5:00 p.m., followed by study time until 6:20 p.m., and then cleaning activities continue until 6:45 p.m. This schedule applies to primary school children, while lower secondary school students follow a reversed routine, with study time preceding a short play period from 6:00 to 6:20 p.m., just before the cleaning.

The classroom setting reflects the multicultural composition of the group, with signs displaying the names of ethnic foods and words written in Arabic. This appears to be a pedagogical strategy aimed at supporting the acquisition of the Italian language, which many of the students with migrant backgrounds do not speak at home with their families. Other posters promote cultural diversity and tolerance, encouraging self-expression without fear of social stigma or marginalization. One such poster reads: "If you run against the wind, you feel a different wind!" Another poster tries to build a link between after-school and home life: "I need my own space to study!"

Learning takes place in small groups, with each educator supporting a maximum of three students. During the first non-participant observation, there was only one Italian student among approximately fifteen pupils of foreign origin. In the second observation, all twenty students were children of immigrant families. There were twelve educators present in the first session and fifteen in the second. Across both observations, primary school children outnumbered those from lower secondary school. Only one middle school student was present in the first session; in the second, all participants were from primary school. A gender imbalance was noted, with a higher number of female students. Two girls wore the hijab. Each group displayed a sense of harmony and mutual engagement in the educational experience. Educators frequently encouraged peer support – for example, to practice subtraction in Maths, one child would lower the fingers of the peer sitting across them.

Some students live in the neighbourhood of San Lorenzo, and their families are employed in the tertiary sector, often in low-skilled jobs, such as restaurant services, hotel reception, personal care for the non-autonomous, and cleaning of homes, offices or hotels' rooms. Other students live in nearby districts, such as Casilino and Prenestino. After the program, they are taken home by educators using private or public transportation. Those living in other districts specifically come to the "Scuoletta" to attend the after-school program, having heard about it through schoolmates of family networks, sometimes along ethnic lines. At this stage of the research, it has not yet been possible to map how many students reside in the neighbourhood and how many come from outside.

The students appear attentive and disciplined: during the observation period, they would only leave their seats after asking permission from the educator in charge. Some have younger siblings enrolled in the same program as well: in such cases, they display responsibility and pay special attention to them.

Students proudly show educators the good grades they received in their morning classes, thus establishing a connection between formal schooling and the after-school program. This dynamic prevents the program from becoming merely a "holding space" for children who cannot stay home alone, or a neighbourhood play centre. Once they finish their homework, students are allowed to go outside and play in the courtyard, where only a few educators are needed as the children play freely and harmoniously. Most educators begin cleaning the classrooms, taking on more demanding tasks, such as lifting desks to clean the floors. It is noteworthy that some mothers accompany their children to the after-school program and then remain in the building – either in the corridor or the garden – chatting among themselves without interfering with the educational activities. These women are predominantly foreign, coming from Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, or India (during the first observation, there was also a man who stayed for half an hour to ask educators about his child's school performance). This phenomenon is significant both because it offers women a space for socialization beyond their role as mothers, and because it brings the school institution closer to immigrant families, who often find in the after-school program the empathetic relationship they do not experience in formal school settings.

The Popular Educators: Biographical Path and Social Values

Obviously, educators play a fundamental role. At this stage, it is not possible to provide a definitive analysis of these actors: we can only identify some tendencies that may help guide our response to the research question: 'Is the political culture of the district the main factor shaping their activism?'. During the initial phase of fieldwork – especially in a sensitive context such as education for underage students – it is advisable not to burden educators with in-depth interviews. Gaining their trust without being intrusive is essential. Indeed, during our first observation, we asked three educators to participate in interviews; one of them politely declined. We interviewed the coordinator of the "Scuoletta" project and another educator. Giulia explained that educators engaged in San Lorenzo rarely have past or present experience in political parties; many, instead, come from "secular" scouting movements. She herself started

there, then decided, as she put it, "to use my time to do something more useful".

Fabio, on the other hand, had never participated in any social activity before. Now that he is working less (we did not inquire about the reasons), he decided to devote time to the after-school program because he could not accept that children of foreign origin had fewer opportunities that Italian ones. He wanted to help ensure they could start from the same educational level, in order to develop enough cultural capital to compete in the labour market. Fabio does not live in San Lorenzo (he did not say where), but he chose to be involved in the "Scuoletta" because he believes the neighbourhood is well-suited for the kind of support he wanted to provide. When asked explicitly whether he considers his activity to be "political", he answered yes: even though he is not affiliated with any party, his goal is clearly political, as it aims to reduce inequality. In fact, he often discusses politics with other educators, who share the same objective. Their group is highly cohesive and they often meet in the evenings as well.

The political dimension of solidarity expressed by the "Scuoletta" is strongly emphasized in Giulia's words. Although the interview was brief, certain features of the association's pedagogical approach emerged clearly. The "Scuoletta" aims to propose a new pedagogy, as the one currently prevailing in the Italian school system is shaped around the capabilities and aspirations of the middle class. However, "this model structurally disadvantages many students – such as those who are children of immigrant parents – who often achieve poor academic outcomes, ultimately leading to school dropout. This is precisely why the after-school program is necessary. In a truly democratic and inclusive school system, the "Scuoletta" would be redundant".

We did not discuss the theoretical foundations of the pedagogy it adopts – an issue that certainly warrants further exploration in a future meeting. However, within the *doposcuola* in San Lorenzo, the political dimension is not merely theoretical. For instance, the day after my second observation, the "Scuoletta" was scheduled to participate in a public meeting organized by the local network of community associations, focused on the ongoing transformations of San Lorenzo neighbourhood. The disappearance of long-term residents – replaced by a transient population of students and tourists – and the resulting inability of new families to find affordable housing also has repercussions on the quality of education. The families of the students who attend the "Scuoletta" are facing increasing difficulties due to the deterioration of local welfare and

the risk of a new wave of racism, fuelled by the presence of a far-right government in Italy.

At the end of the public assembly, participants were invited to the "Scuoletta" to sample ethnic food prepared by the students' families. We can therefore identify three distinct levels of political engagement within the activities of the after-school program:

Scalar level	Characteristics	Empirical evidence
Micro	At the personal level, the educator makes a political choice by supporting the Scuoletta's students.	"I started in the scouting movement, then decided to use my time to do something more useful" (Giulia)
Meso	Concerning the users of service: students are given the opportunity to catch up academically, and start on equal footing with their peers who hold Italian citizenship.	Fabio could not accept that children of foreign origin had fewer opportunities than the Italian ones.
Macro	Involving the active participation of the after-school program and its students in neighbourhood political initiatives, with the aim of shaping the area into one that is "family friendly", not solely oriented toward tourists and university students.	The Scuoletta usually participates in public assemblies about various problems in San Lorenzo district: gentrification, loss of residents, high rental costs, drug and alcohol addiction in youth population.

Table 1_ Level of political engagement expressed by the "Scuoletta" after-school

The Meaning of Participation

The classification outlined above would require a deeper analysis of the current meaning of "participation". Here, we limit ourselves to noting how the crisis of liberal democracy – manifested in voter abstention and the rise of populist movements – has prompted scholars to recognize as political those economic and social models that challenge the dominant paradigms, even when they are not promoted by mainstream political parties or trade unions. As such, the concept of political participation is not only confined to the pursuit of power or the intent to influence governing elites; it now encompasses expressive and identity-based dimensions. However, this is not merely an individual experience: activists build networks among associations that are no longer defined along rigid ideological lines, and are therefore more willing to form

alliances and combine their efforts. At the same time, social organizations increasingly become spaces for new forms of political innovation. The highly structured narratives of the twentieth century, focused on production, give way to new forms of planning that center on consumption, public services, local welfare, and minority rights.

In this regard, Ulrich Beck spoke of the "sub-politicization" of everyday life (Beck [1986] 1999) – yet this is not entirely a novel phenomenon. As recent studies have also shown, this "other politics" (which operates within the social sphere, beyond mere assistance) has deep roots, reworking patterns of participation that emerged during the 1980s. That decade is often associated with "the return to the private sphere" by many activists; in reality, the rejection of the "double violence" of the 1970s (on one hand, the violence of far-left political groups, and on the other, the massacres carried out by neo-fascists with the support of elements inner to the secret services) gave rise to alternative social models. These models blurred the boundaries between public and private, proposing "individualized collective actions" (Micheletti and McFarland 2010) in which collaboration and solidarity persisted, but without stifling individual freedom – precisely because they developed outside the traditional framework and ritualism of twentieth-century political parties. Another aspect highlights the political dimension of the educators' commitment within the "Scuoletta": their ongoing reflection on the experience they are part of and the meaning it entails. In the short term, the after-school program offers significant support to students. Even in the medium terms, its positive outcomes are likely to be substantial, as it enables students to enter the next stages of schooling without educational gaps. It is highly probable that the young participants in the "Scuoletta" will not drop out of school. However, in the long term, there is a risk that the after-school program might end up "legitimizing" the downsizing and poor quality of the state school system. Morning school teachers may stop making efforts to support struggling students, knowing that the afternoon program will take care of this task. Even from the students' perspective, formal schooling might be delegitimized, as the most effective support will be perceived as coming from grassroots educators. This risk is frequently discussed in the Scuoletta's assemblies. While no definitive response has yet been found, the issue will be further explored in our research. For now, it is sufficient to note how self-criticism and continuous analysis of one's own practice are indicators of a solid political awareness expressed through social engagement. Once the political dimension of the Scuoletta's activity is acknowledged, the next step is to assess whether and to what extent the local subculture influenced the development of the after-school initiative, or whether other

factors played a role. Recent and highly relevant studies (Parziale 2023) have confirmed that Italy is also undergoing a global reform of education aligned with neoliberal principles (Mayo 2015). More specifically, the school system is involved in a technical-organizational transition in which one of its key players (the teaching stuff) struggles to redefine its role in the educational field.

School and Conflict

At the same time, schools have always been permeable to conflict (Bourdieu 1984), in line with their pedagogical mission. For at least a decade, teachers have shown solidarity with high school students protesting the reduction of public education funding and the introduction of reforms that, on the one hand, allowed private actors to enter school boards and, on the other, provided companies with young students to be used as a labor force (Cini 2017). In 2012, for instance, in Italy the joint mobilization of teachers and students succeeded in halting the Monti government's proposal to increase teaching hours without raising salaries (Piazza 2014). However, the convergence of goals between students and teachers can be considered a novelty: in everyday school life, these two groups are typically in conflict, as students often view teachers as the "proximate institution" to be resisted, while teachers tend to perceive students as problematic subjects to be disciplined when they break school rules. The recent and numerous episodes of bullying by students (and at times even by their parents) against school personnel further confirm this climate of tension within educational institutions.

Despite this, recent mobilizations have increasingly taken place in alliance. This anomaly may be explained by the fact that today mass protests are less politically oriented and more corporatist in nature compared to the past. Moreover, a paradoxical generational alliance has emerged between students and teachers: the "lengthening of youth" as a social condition, combined with the relatively young age of many teachers, creates a dynamic in which educators behave as "older students". The precarious nature of teachers' employment also plays a significant role in heightening their engagement in conflictual practices, especially as many young workers in schools are not unionized, unlike previous generations.

In this context, commitment to a self-organized after-school program can be considered a form of dissent, akin to participating in a rally or a strike, as it constitutes a way of doing politics by other means (Parziale 2025). Popular education carries a revolutionary attitude on multiple levels:

1.   Providing academic support to struggling students represents an attempt to counteract the reproduction of educational inequalities, echoing Lorenzo Milani's view of schooling as a class struggle (Mayo 2013);

2.   Popular educators do not merely reinforce school-sanctioned knowledge aligned with the value system of the imperialist bourgeoisie. Rather, "they attempt to adapt Italian/Western mainstream culture to the cultural background of students from other parts of the world, fostering intercultural dialogue" (Parziale 2025, 81);

3.   The after-school program examined in this research display a strategic flexibility reminiscent of classic revolutionary theory: instead of confronting the dominant values of official schooling with wholly heterodox messages (which students may not even be able to understand), it seeks a compromise that allows coexistence between the traditional school curriculum (e.g., a Muslim student attending an Italian high school cannot avoid studying *the Divine Comedy*) and the cultural framework imparted by families from different sociocultural contexts.

In the case study of the educators involved in the "Scuoletta", does the political dimension of their activism reflect the subcultural traits of the neighbourhood? Could the epistemological and strategic sophistication observed in their teaching practices be informed by the political refinement of a territory historically associated with revolutionary aspirations and significant social movements? Although this research is still in its early stages, our initial findings suggest a positive response: none of the three educators we interviewed live in San Lorenzo, yet all deliberately come to the neighbourhood to provide the services of the "Scuoletta". Although they were not asked explicitly, it seems unlikely that they would have chosen to engage in a popular after-school initiative in a neighbourhood other than San Lorenzo. Indeed, here they have found a cultural and political disposition conducive to their work. What does this disposition consist of? This question will require further analysis in the next stages of the research. For now, we note the neighbourhood's solidarity networks toward the most disadvantaged and subaltern groups; the general absence of discrimination toward migration (though xenophobic attacks have unfortunately occurred here as well); the progressive political address of the local administration (the district has always been governed by centre-left coalitions); and the cultural importance attributed to education in a neighbourhood located near Europe's largest university. Finally, the area's working class and artisan past may symbolically connect to the "diasporic identities" (Parziale 2025) embodied by the young students attending the "Scuoletta".

As a conclusion, today the educational system is marked by global tensions. Learning processes have been profoundly disrupted by the digital revolution and by the inability to manage variables such as Artificial Intelligence – understood here simply as the acquisition of knowledge through electronic devices rather than through a human figure traditionally defined as "the teacher". This upheaval is compounded by the neoliberal defunding of public education, a process that has been underway for years. School buildings, gyms, furniture and software infrastructure all suffer from decreasing financial support, often paradoxically redirected toward private schools. The existing socioeconomic conditions "out there" influence the school, which not only fails to correct them, but often exacerbates them, channelling students toward adult destinies that frequently replicate – or worsen – the socioeconomic paths of their parents. This is a global issue, so much so that *The New Zealand Listener*, published on the other side of the world, asked in its January 20-26, 2024 issue: "Is our schools broken?" (McLauchlan 2024). Popular education activism represents signs of resistance: it deserve to be studied as researchers, and supported as citizens.

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After-school activism within the state school system and within the neighbourhood: the "Scuoletta" case study in San Lorenzo (Rome)

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Abstract. The article is based on a qualitative empirical research: non-participant observation and in-depth interviews with residents of San Lorenzo neighbourhood in Rome and popular educators of the after-school "Scuoletta". The objective is to understand whether and to what extent the subculture of the area influences this form of resistance to the neo-liberal school which, instead of helping the subaltern classes, relegates them to a destiny of social marginalization and labour exploitation. The research is not yet finished, but some results are already discernible.

Keywords: after-school, neo-liberal reform, popular educators.

L'activisme populaire au sein de l'école publique et sur le terrain. L'étude de cas de la Scuoletta à San Lorenzo (Rome)

Résumé. L'article est basé sur une recherché empirique qualitative: observation non participant et entretiens approfondis avec des habitants du quartier de San Lorenzo et des éducateurs populaires de la Scuoletta. L'objectif est de comprendre si et dans quelle mesure la sous-culture du quartier influence cette forme de résistance à l'école néolibérale qui, au lieu d'aider les classes subalternes, les relègue à un destin de marginalisation sociale et d'exploitation du travail. La recherche n'est pas encore terminée, mais certains résultants sont déjà perceptibles.

Mots clés: école publique, classes subalternes, éducateurs populaires

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El activismo popular en la escuela pública y en el barrio: el caso de la Scuoletta en San Lorenzo (Roma)

Resumen. El artículo si basa en una investigación empírica cualitativa: observación no participante y entrevistas en profundidad con habitantes del barrio de San Lorenzo y educadores populares de la escuela extraescolar "Scuoletta". El objetivo es comprender si la subcultura de la zona influye, y en qué medida, en esta forma de resistencia a la escuela neoliberal que, en lugar de ayudar a las clases subalternas, las relega a un destino de marginación social y explotación laboral. La investigación aún no ha concluido, pero ya vislubran algunos resultados.

Palabras clave: educación popular, clases subalternas, marginación social

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