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In copertina: Hamedina square (Tel Aviv), the biggest demonstration of the social justice movement in Israel (September, 3 2011) (© Activestill)

Silvia Pitzalis

Positioning as a method. The earthquake in Emilia Romagna and the forms of “exilience”¹

1. *A long introduction*

This article is the result of a research project carried out in the “Bassa Modenese”², an area affected by two earthquakes that hit the northern part of the Po-Emilian plain between 20th and 29th May 2012. The districts of Modena, Ferrara, Mantova, Reggio-Emilia, Bologna and Rovigo were particularly struck, with 27 casualties, 15,000 displaced persons³ and enormous damage to local historical and cultural heritage sites. The economic and productive system was negatively impacted: numerous businesses were affected, particularly in the area’s cutting-edge, bio-medical sector. The population was impacted across the board, the social structure being so varied within these territories.

The research project was carried out within this scenario between October 2012 and November 2014, and focused on the micro-area extending across the municipalities of Mirandola, Cavezzo, San Possidonio and Concordia sul Secchia (Modena districts). The main interlocutors were the members of the earthquake-victims’ Committee named *Sisma.12*, who gave birth to specific political practices “from the bottom up”. These practices were realized through participatory and shared processes, understood as ways to reflect on the world and on the participants’ role as political subjects. Through these same practices the Committee offered an alternative to the institutional re-construction and its decision-making process.

The singular relationship between the members of *Sisma.12* and the institutions, particularly the Democratic Party and the city council presided over by Vasco Errani, illustrates the former’s pressing desire to substantially and systemically modify those power structures that, over time, have increasingly distanced and alienated them. This creates a process, fueled by consumerism, which is ignited when the dialogue between political institutions and a citizenry that for decades has accepted to take on a role of passive consensus, finally crumbles.

This consensus, which is evident in the apathetic subscription to the various political parties,

hence undergoes a slow but clear decline, causing disaffection with politics. A general feeling that the promises of wealth, prosperity, progress, improvement, justice, equity and peace have been betrayed becomes more and more common: individuals no longer believe in the trustworthiness of the solutions proposed by the institutional authorities, nor in their effectiveness (Boni 2006). The subsequent weakening of the individual’s political involvement appears to be caused by two factors: first, the hegemony’s opposition to the individual’s participation in public life and politics, shown in the implementation of the mandate mechanism; second, the subjects’ self-exclusion from a world dominated by a caste made up of politicians regarded as aliens, who own the media and manage financial resources, driven by personal gain and goals.

Nonetheless, in this context and in response to it, we witness the birth of groups such as *Sisma.12* that create practices “from below” and assume a fundamental role in foreshadowing a different distribution of power. They claim, in a more or less explicit way, different standards of democracy, inclusion, justice, morality and humanity that institutions do not offer (Boni 2012). They set themselves up as new emancipatory forces “from below” that express new possibilities for mobilization, autonomy and gaining of consciousness.

New ways of imagining the political sphere have emerged since the creation of that ideological vacuum that followed the collapse of the socialist systems and the subsequent waning of hope in the “revolutionary perspectives” that inspired the major left-wing movements of the sixties. Social movements, characterized by their opposition to institutions and political parties, have been the leading actors of this redefinition, in their attempt to create new types of political, cultural, social and economic arenas and new systems of thought using specific discourses and practices. In this light, social movements could be seen as spaces within which individuals share clear objectives, ideals and systems of thought and in which collective action is achieved through the meticulous coordination of individual actions. The mobilization phase that

follows this organizational endeavor aims to ensure the achievement of those set common goals and to complete the process through which the actors of a specific field of action give themselves a structure, however variable and flexible. The typologies of mobilization are incredibly varied: they are open and as such devoid of hierarchy; they are the organic expressions of a civil society in the making and of its willingness to shift decision-making from palaces to piazzas, from institutions to society (Boni 2011). The political potential of these social entities therefore resides in the segmented and changeable organization of those spaces deemed free from the coercive action of dominant power.

These political arenas are founded on the idea of autonomy of thoughts and actions: an idea that enables individuals to manage and support themselves according to their own laws and that allows the right to self-determination and self-government, free from “interference from above”, to be practiced. In other words, this idea translates into the freedom to act according to one’s own will, attitude, inclinations and desires. This need for autonomy nourishes the ever more numerous social movements that commit to the creation of autonomous arenas and relations that experiment with distinct practices: the decentralization of decisional processes; the individual’s direct action; and ways of life which offer an alternative to those dictated by capitalism and neoliberalism. As new “political spaces” (Abélès 2001), these realities seem to escape from a homologizing rationale and materialize, instead, into ever-changing fertile arenas, within which different views and ways of being-in-the-world intersect and interconnect.

Without stepping into the domain of the actual achievements these movements have gained, it would seem useful to investigate the manner in which people modify political praxes in ways that are always locally and historically determined. It would also be helpful to interpret and understand their attempts – and failures – to regenerate the economic, political and social system. Moreover, it would be useful to see how they redefine themselves as coming “from” and working “for” the bottom: that is how the individuals who would generally be subjected to – rather than practice – politics, acquire awareness and subsequently step up to active participation. Finally, it would be helpful to unveil how these *agencies*, by constructing citizenship as a lived space and as a dialogical process, create an opening to alternative systems of thought (Koenler, Rossi 2012).

The study of these phenomena “from below” allows for an analysis of the weaknesses of politics, questions its characteristics and practices, and iden-

tifies the areas in which it is more challenging for it to take roots or develop. In order to bring forth the critical potential of anthropology when studying power in its current formations, the researcher must focus on the reactions that power fosters, the starting point being his experience of researching among those social groups that have been excluded from the process. Anthropology would in fact provide the individuals that are on a knowledge-gaining journey (researcher and interlocutors) with specific tools and strategies that would facilitate an understanding of the ways in which the political subjectivities that are potential makers of their own destiny, are formed. The aim is hence that of gaining knowledge focused on better comprehending the consequences of inserting singular histories in the global process; this subsequently places this argumentation in the wider context of the analysis of the relationship between “high powers” and “powers from below”, in between today’s coercion and emancipation (Ciavolella 2013).

Ethnography is hence seen as a successful method to challenge dominant discourses and practices: we are in fact here committed to the researcher’s ethical responsibility to bear witness and spread the truth about the politics that damage excluded individuals. In this article we will provide first of all an analysis of *Sisma.12*, highlighting its reactions to those managerial procedures that undermine the right to a concerted re-construction of the territory. The Committee’s members politically demand, through exile practices, the recognition of their will to bring forth a change and of their individual potential. Indeed they oppose those decision-making mechanisms focused on private and/or oligarchical interests. Than a series of questions will hence be posed with particular reference to the role of the researcher and his positioning within the analysed context, specifically attempting to give an answer to the following: what is the role of the researcher in this scenario and what shape does his participation take? To whom, or to what end, can the ethnographic representation of these realities be useful? Can the dilemma of the researcher’s positioning, extensively discussed in anthropology, take on a different perspective within the mentioned arenas? Can engaged anthropology ethnographically represent these forms of humanity?

In the ethnographic example here below presented, the researcher shared the participants’ political ideology: this allowed her to actively and consciously participate in the practices of the individuals the research was focusing on. The researcher’s choice to make her positioning clear was a methodological choice, prompted by the necessity to put anthropology at the service of the interlocutors’ objectives.

The reasons behind such choice can be found in the idea that the ethnographer, carrier of analytical tools that can provide "different" reflections, can contribute to the creation of trajectories for change and innovation based on the strengths and weaknesses highlighted in this research.

2. *Forms of exilience and political spaces: the Sisma.12 Committee*

I will set up the scene of this context. The *Sisma.12* earthquake victims' Committee, born in the aftermath of the catastrophe, represents a concrete example of what has been introduced above. The members of the Committee, chosen as the main interlocutors of a broader study of the Emilian earthquake carried out between 2012 and 2014, did in fact develop their own politics "from below": proposed as concrete alternatives to the institutional management of the post-earthquake context, these politics are here analyzed as socio-cultural responses to the catastrophe. Natural disasters typically cause crisis, imbalance and anomia: the way in which some political mobilizations and ideologies "from below" become emancipatory endeavors through which individuals (re)gain self-consciousness and self-determination – as well as tools to counteract the negative effects of catastrophes – have been the focus of this anthropological research.

Sisma.12 has been considered as a "political space", a hotbed of political practices, specifically thanks to its post-disaster solution-focused and management approaches that stand in contrast with institutional choices and actions.

Through the "magnifying lens" of the Committee, I have also been able to analyze the relationship between Committee members and institutions, set against the backdrop of the socio-political dynamics that arose in the Emilian territory after the earthquake. In this light, these relationships have appeared as privileged points of view from which to shed a light on the significance of current socio-political phenomena on a wider level.

The analysis was focused on the practices, i.e. the actions, behaviors and strategies the Committee members chose and implemented to improve their future prospects, and highlighted the participants' dynamic and propositive-active character. The work here presented is, therefore, the partial outcome of observing one of the many ways of being-in-the-world, analyzed from one of the many possible points of view.

2.1. *The Sisma.12 Committee*

Sisma.12 is a Committee of earthquake victims defined in its charter as "a territorial, non-party and horizontal Committee". This triple self-definition becomes clearer when observing the Committee's characteristic traits. It is "territorial", in that it does not have a unique and precise localization, but rather proves to be itinerant, given its effort to be present across the entire "crater", i.e. the area affected by the earthquake that extends across the *Ferrara* and *Carpignano* territories. The interlocutors in fact perceive this territory as a common good, as much owned as collectivized, in need of preservation and safeguarding; this regardless of the fact that in Italy the State still has a certain structural difficulty in acknowledging the strengthening of the bond between citizens and their territory and in finding a solution to the widespread dissatisfaction with delegative democracy (Boni 2011). In response to the Committee members' demands to be equipped with a representative instrument, and pursuing the idea of civic participation, the Committee has the purpose (declared in its charter)⁴ of being a container of information, ideas, projects and actions which the earthquake victims themselves have conceived and proposed, all directed at a reconstruction in opposition to that proposed by the institutions. On a practical level, *Sisma.12* aims to be the tool through which earthquake victims can establish themselves as "conscious individuals" who, becoming aware of their condition and subsequently overcoming it, finally turn into the protagonists of their own lives. The members' main objective is in fact that of freeing themselves from the injustices they are experiencing, pursuant to their emancipation and independence from institutional and representative bodies.

The aforementioned process has also been conceived and carried out with a refusal to identify with a specific political party. This is not so much in order to eliminate political affiliations, rather as an attempt to overcome them by offering a common ground: in terms of identity, that of feeling like/being an earthquake victim, i.e. to have directly or indirectly suffered the losses caused by the earthquake; in terms of shared claims, the fight for the recognition of effective "from the bottom" solutions to the catastrophe. It is hence on these grounds that the Committee defines itself as "non-party". Moreover, this definition also equates with the attempt to lay the foundations for a free space for discussion where each individual's ideas and forms of (political) expression are received with equal dignity and consideration. We hence find ourselves face to face with practices that exclude official identification

with a specific party, but which are inclusive of different political affiliations, provided that they converge towards a unique objective: “to re-build the *Bassa* from the bottom”⁵.

Nevertheless, despite the Committee’s rejection of all political factions, some members’ known affiliation to specific parties has sparked (and is still sparking) accusations, by both *Sisma.12* members and individuals not belonging to the Committee. These accusations have included (and continue to include) that of careerism and/or of electoral interests on the part of some of the earthquake victims, which the accused have interpreted as the consequence of a misunderstanding between what being “party-affiliated” and “politicized” means. According to the *Sisma.12* members, being “party-affiliated” means being consistent with a specific institutionalized party orientation; a feature which, allegedly, does not characterize the Committee and from which they wish to distance themselves. On the other hand, *Sisma.12* admits to being “politicized” in so far as its claims and struggles take on a strong political value, though its expression is based on collective decision-making and action-taking, rather than on choices and actions imposed from above. The interlocutors state that, given that the post-earthquake reconstruction is managed by a political system that acts according to specific ideologies and strategies, it is evident that the issues they face and the solutions and demands they propose cannot be devoid of a political connotation. For those earthquake victims that do not belong to the Committee, *Sisma.12* appears doubly alien: firstly in that its political action differs from that expressed exclusively through vote and which results in mandates; secondly in that its exercise of power is not coercive or expressed by social imposition.

Finally, *Sisma.12* is a “horizontal Committee” in that its decisions are taken in a participatory and concerted way, normally via public assemblies that endeavor to be as “across-the-board” as possible and so are open to all citizenry. There are two types of assembly in which decisions are taken. The first, which meets on a weekly basis, almost always takes place in Cavezzo (Modena); it is open to everyone, but is *de facto* attended mostly by the more active Committee members. During these meetings, decisions are made on the course of action to be taken (what, with whom, how, where, when) and on which practices to follow (to organize a picket line or a meeting with the institutions). The second assembly type, which is defined as “public” and meets approximately twice a month, takes place across various locations depending on the availability of meeting rooms throughout the “crater”. Its function is to share with all the participants what deci-

sions have already been agreed on. Journalists from various local newspapers are also invited to these gatherings, to facilitate the widespread circulation of information within and without the crater’s area.

The process of change, claim and struggle taken on by *Sisma.12* has seen the active participation of earthquake victims between the ages of 35 and 65 whose experiences and principles mostly belong to the left, the extreme left and of extra-parliamentary groups such as autonomists and anarchists. Despite the prevalence of the “leftist” component within the Committee, the leading contribution of other elements is not compromised, as the aim is that of creating diversified relationships within the Committee. Nonetheless, this can only be successful provided that a single common objective is shared: that of wanting to make an active contribution to the decision-making process affecting the reconstruction.

Sisma.12 expresses the urgency to rebuild the community through the conscious and active participation of those affected by the catastrophe, hence with particular attention to the post-earthquake context; nonetheless, because its members are bearers of specific ideals, the Committee cannot but widen its scope to the more general crisis in political and civic participation.

The intrinsic politicization of these individuals, their commitment (temporary, fortuitous or long-term) to the public sphere and the historical and psychological processes that lead to the adoption of a particular cause, are the product of different itineraries, but they all somehow fall within the same political realm. Only by coming together, state the interlocutors, will they be able to create regenerative processes and develop effective solutions to the current circumstances. Their claims, mostly related to the right to a home and a job, to the preservation of their territory and to the active contribution of the citizens that have been earthquake victims to the decision-making process, are expressed via rallies, demonstrations, pickets, meetings with the institutions, press conferences, radio and TV broadcasts and the like.

Departing from a concerted reflection on their condition of earthquake victims and hence of “underprivileged”, the *Sisma.12* members are attempting to re-define the meaning of citizenship, which is founded on “the right to have rights”. This idea of citizenship is collectively developed through transformative actions that promote participation in the elaboration of rights and duties. This process is carried out by connecting the abstract sphere of rights “on paper” to their concrete implementation and by linking the refusal to simply make use of existing sets of rules with the request for active participation in their re-definition (Malighetti 2012).

The attempt is to tear down the hierarchical system and intellectual divisions within the reconstruction work by means of a re-appropriation of the reconstruction process by the earthquake victims, highlighting people's ability to plan for themselves and to take action through cooperation and participation in the territory's management. It is in this way that a new concept of planning arises: no longer a science or professional discourse considered the prerogative of an elitist class or discipline, or the governments' sole privilege (Newman 2011), but rather the active expression of politics conceived and exercised from the "bottom up".

2.2. Political practices as a form of exilience

Since the sixties a rampant crisis has affected union and political party representation in Italy and Europe, revealing an increasingly exacerbated de-politicization of society (Ciavolella 2013). On the one hand, this has indicated a growing inability of authorities and institutions to fill the gap between local needs and practices and (supra)national economic power structures. On the other hand, it has shown an obstinate resolve to immortalize the structures of "socio-power", understood as the combination of the conditioning forces that shape the relationship between individuals and collectivities expressed in the socialization process (Boni 2011).

Within this framework, the members of *Sisma.12* have been verbalizing a radical critique of conventional economic and political systems, wishing to shift the objectives from closed-ended politics, based on mandates, to participatory alternatives that, to them, appear more effective. The political practices they manufacture aim to generate new political configurations and to enhance the contrastive role produced by dissent, shifting attention towards those practices that, rather than perpetrate the existent, break with it. Furthermore, having appointed itself as the negotiating agent between the different subjectivities involved in the dialogue, *Sisma.12* has attempted to combine the struggle for given rights that specifically concern the earthquake victims, with a wider battle: that of demolishing the mechanisms that produce exclusion, inequality and a gap between rulers and ruled, in an attempt to redefine the political arena, together with its actors, institutions, priorities and goals. By doing so, *Sisma.12* also criticizes the effectiveness of the legislation and management so far implemented by the Regione Emilia Romagna, governed by the Democratic Party. In this sense, the Committee's members deem the institutions doubly responsible: as in the double connotation of the term "responsible", which refers both to who is

the cause of a given situation and who is in charge of its management and resolution.

Centered on the relationship between the social actors' (agency) capability to act and the socio-political structures, *Sisma.12* aims to create "everyday" re-existence practices (Scott 1990) or "re-appropriation" tactics (de Certeau 2005: 60-70) with an effective social function. It hence qualifies as a "shared and participated space" within which individuals who have personally experienced the contradictions of existing structures and, for this reason, have mobilized to change them, gather together and cooperate.

If, generally, these types of politics "from the bottom" take shape in response and/or in contrast to something else (often against the oppressive power of the authorities and of the centralizing forces), in this instance the discourse and practices conceived and implemented by the subjectivities constituting the Committee prompts individuals to take affirmative action. Indeed, in order to bring forth an effective alternative to institutional and authority-led reconstruction, they claim their autonomy through horizontal and collective practices. Thus it comes to light how every social actor's position in the world is defined by his way of acting in the world (Malighetti 2012).

In order to define these human expressions, I have coined the term "exilience": a neologism formed by the combination of the Latin verb *salio* (to leap) and the preposition *ex* (outward), which indicates the individual's will to come out of his condition of discomfort by looking to the future. In this context the term acquires the literal meaning of "leaping out", hence indicating the individual's desire to change, to overcome an existing crisis, not to revert to a pre-existing condition, but rather to leave it behind forever and thus achieve a deep pal-ingensis. Moreover, so defined, the term exilience also refers to the concept of actively "being-in-the-world" and hence to the intention of affirming one's presence in the face of "historical apocalypses" (De Martino 1977) in a contrastive way. The concept is also to be interpreted as the constant "cultural reinvention" of one's soul, of one's way of being-in-the-world and of relating to others (Césaire 1950). Finally, this concept seems better suited to defining the individual's active forms of reaction to socially generated and politically determined hostile, stressful, restraining and unjust conditions, than the notion of resilience which, for three decades, has characterized this sector's studies.

The notion of resilience has been used in catastrophe literature since the 1970s, but 'became more widespread during the 1990s' (Revet 2012:

52), when it began to be considered the most appropriate human response to catastrophes. Within practitioners' manuals the term is sometimes used in contrast to the older notion of vulnerability, and sometimes together with it, as a complementary term. The definition proposed by the International Institute for Sustainable Development is a clear example of this trend: 'Vulnerability is a product both of physical exposure to hazards and of a community's capability to cope with and recover from its impact, i.e. its resilience'. The implicit assumption is that a system or community could be considered vulnerable when incapable of developing resilience; and vice versa, a community would be resilient when it demonstrated itself capable of overcoming vulnerability (Benadusi 2011: 420).

In psychology, the term indicates the process through which individuals, families and communities face negative events, maintaining authority over their own lives through strategies and behaviours that could restore the previous situation. This meaning refers to the psychological operations that are shaped by experience and the subsequent changes in the mental mechanisms linked to it. Flach (1988: 58) sees resilience as the ability to operate a psycho-biological recovery; an interactive process activated by a number of interlinked psychological, biological and environmental components that place individuals in the position to overcome periods of significant stress and transformation.

Resilience was a term used in the seventies within systemic ecology and, understood as an "operative strategy for adapting to crisis" (Benadusi 2011: 98), became particularly relevant in researches dedicated to catastrophe responses, subsequently receiving remarkable international significance (Cooper, Walker 2011). In the mentioned disciplinary context resilience "does not require a special ability to foresee what will come, rather the capability to minimize the impact and adapt to the events, whichever unexpected form would they take" (Benadusi 2011: 98), definition that highlights a degree of passivity which invalidates its use within the context of this research. The event is in fact actively pondered over in light of one's socio-cultural baggage while the responses to the catastrophe do not depend on the fortune or misfortune of being vulnerable or resilient individuals.

An earthquake can be interpreted as a disarticulation of the social structure and of the local system of meanings if we accept the definition of catastrophe as a type and degree of social disintegration that follows the impact of a "disaster agent" on a group (McLuckie 1975). This disarticulation prompts a desire – a need – for re-organization, to be achieved

through a process whose magnitude would be dependent on the individuals' needs and choices. The latter would need to exert themselves culturally, not by "minimizing the impact and adapting to the events", but rather by rethinking the world and their role within it, re-organizing the space they live in, adapting it to a shared idea of "effective society" (Ligi 2009). During this regeneration phase, the individuals give new meaning to the catastrophe using exilient strategies; they regard the territory as their own heritage, transforming it and at the same time building a better future. Through these exilience forms the individual's desire to overcome tendencies of "pastism" and victimization logics starts to coincide with their wish to become the creators of their own future, and this is seen as an attempt at renewal. Moreover, its aim is not to pursue a claim, but rather an affirmation of one's own right to decide and participate, hence affirming one's own will to be present.

Sisma.12 is hence a laboratory of ideas and practices, an anthropological experiment in which the earthquake victims, having experienced a common trauma, strive to share a common planning dimension and to develop new ways of realizing this project. This does not mean that the path the Committee's members have trodden has always been smooth, that the decisions made have always been unanimous; nor that the exchanges have always been devoid of contrast, misunderstandings and disputes. If it is true though that "the movement is its own culture" (Boni 2006: 7), the imperfections and inconsistencies of which it is bearer – it being produced by and made up of real people – highlight its poetic potential.

The case here treated is, nevertheless, a valuable experience and a concrete proof of the creative and regenerative power of the committee's members. Sure enough, they have developed and established exilient responses to the dual crisis that affected them as earthquake victims and as citizens, and this has highlighted original potentials. Tarrow states that social movements "often achieve their goals even when they fail, [as] their action sets off important political, cultural and international changes" (*Ibidem* 1994: 2): indeed to analyze social movements only in light of the dichotomy 'failure-effectiveness' implies the risk of disregarding their fluidity and the rich variety. A social movement is an effective outcome in its own right as, in most cases, it is the product of social awakening mechanisms, of an opposition to hegemonic power, of the individual's struggle and participation which, rejecting the present situation, regenerate his way of being-in-the-world and aspire to a better future. This process is carried out in a propositive-active

way through exilience mechanisms that do not exclusively derive from the individual's psycho-mental inclination to "resist" against coercive and hegemonic forces; but that also do not equate with resilience practices, another attitude of psychological origin, which aims to go back to a pre-existing condition. We are instead dealing with active forms of participatory construction of itineraries, practices and ways of being that break with the existing ones by "leaping out of them" (*exiliere*), developing alternatives directed towards a better future.

3. Positioning, commitment and reflectiveness

From the complex framework here presented, arise a series of methodological questions related to the researcher's role within these intricate scenarios, and to the value of his writing. Issues pertaining to the detached gaze of scientific analysis and the ideological inclinations of the researcher within the research setting, deriving from personal ethical and political principles, is somewhat debated within the disciplinary field. It becomes challenging to decide on an appropriate and universal positioning, since it is rather the fieldwork that produces the research and establishes the method and this cannot be independent from the researcher's moral, ethical and ideological development. Indeed, this is the reason why it is necessary to look for a middle-ground positioning that will make an analysis of the ethnographic relationship possible.

With regards to the research hereby presented, it has been impossible to conduct that participatory and *super partes* observation so cherished by anthropological tradition, during fieldwork. The interlocutors found it inconceivable to exclude me from the activities they were carrying out and to deem me a mere spectator. Indeed the key factors that in this specific instance allowed my access to the group consisted of the active participation I decided to adopt as a method and the politico-moral belief system I brought to the surface. My decision and will to clearly position myself in favor and support of *Sisma.12*'s struggle appeared to be the only way to conduct my study. This stance does not equate with discrediting those ethnographies that assume a more detached methodology, but rather with being aware that this involvement could have provoked analytical and interpretative errors. Nevertheless, within the framework of this case study, the fact that the (young and inexperienced) researcher made her positioning clear was a development dictated by the context. This led to achieving neither better nor worse, but certainly and hypothetically different, outcomes. The context I investigated and

had to relate to, was strongly politicized. In order to fit into the group and subsequently conduct my research I had to demonstrate, during fieldwork, that I shared its values. This demonstrative effort was not explicitly imposed on me, but it is evident that once I was acknowledged as bearer of an ideology shared by its members, any initial reticence was replaced by complete openness.

The acquisition of ethnographic knowledge is hence a long, interactive process, that requires patience, commitment, continuous questioning, and within which the researcher, while carrying out his observation, analysis and interpretation of the other, is himself made the object of a simultaneous interpretation and acquisition of meaning. During my fieldwork I went from being suspected of belonging to the *DIGOS* (*Divisione Investigazioni Generali e Operazioni Speciali*, which stands for the Police's "General investigations and special operations division"), to being defined as an "anarchic feminist", although I had never expressed any specific affiliation nor made use of any particular label to define myself. This bestowal of meaning on the part of the interlocutors was based on the process of gaining knowledge of me as an individual and on the interpretation of my statements and behaviors within the spatial and temporal context I shared with the interlocutors.

My involvement in the Committee's struggle was, at the same time, an almost unconscious outcome – certainly dictated by my ideals – as well as the inevitable development of the dynamics within which my interlocutors and myself found ourselves interacting. As bearer of a political ideology afferent to a certain "historical left" that is shared by the *Sisma.12* members, I was "adopted" (this is the term the interlocutors chose) as an integral part of the "group". A prime example of this is the last proposal the Committee's members made to me. Even though the Committee's decision – initially made by means of a Facebook survey and then through a public assembly where the choice was made by show of hands – to put forward its candidacy for the regional elections of the 23rd and 24th of November 2014 was eventually withdrawn at the end of August 2014, and no matter the fact that I had disagreed with this decision, I was asked to stand as candidate on their local party list for the Bologna municipality. This proposal, which had initially taken me aback, eventually made me aware of the fact that my position was now organic to that of the Committee. Considered on the one hand as an internal voice, given my extensive participation in their process, and on the other hand as an external one, not being personally involved in the events, my opinion was valued in the same way as that of the

other members. The additional quality of my contribution, according to the interlocutors, consisted of creating new angles from which to observe, transform and, if necessary, better themselves. In my opinion, it was this mechanism of inclusion that permitted, in this specific case, our ethnographic encounter.

If it is true that *Sisma.12* would like to escape from a unique, univocal and unifying logic and establish itself as a fertile political space in constant growth, within which different visions of the world intersect and interconnect, it is here that, following what Gramsci writes in his *Quaderni* with regards to the formation of intellectuals, we could highlight the first and fundamental role of the engaged researcher, that is: as a “philosopher, artist and man of taste”, the researcher is part of an idea of the world, as long as he follows a specific ethical and moral line of conduct and hence “contributes to supporting or modifying it” or rather to stimulate new ways of considering ourselves and the society we belong to. And the researcher cannot only be eloquent - an external and temporary agent of affections and passions -, but must actively integrate and mingle with the practice, as creator, organizer and “permanent persuader”, since he is not simply an orator (Gramsci 1971: 17). Departing from an analysis of Gramscianism, De Martino provocatively maintains that fieldwork is scientifically impure, seeing that it displays all the characteristics of militant action. This is envisaged as an instrument of creation of a new type of intellectual, the “engaged intellectual”, who has the task of stimulating and supporting the processes aimed at breaking down the isolation of some social classes.

In an editorial published on November 14th 1974 in the daily newspaper *Corriere della Sera*, Pasolini vehemently attacks the institutions that governed the Country (Italy) back then, accusing them of participating in the conspiracy of silence (*omertà*) in relation to the massacres of Piazza Fontana and Piazza della Loggia. According to the writer, politicians, journalists and intellectuals knew the names of those who had desired and organized those bloodsheds but, while the former kept their silence, the latter were denied the evidence. And Pasolini, with rage and disillusionment states: “the intellectual courage for truth and political practice are two irreconcilable things in Italy”. According to the author, intellectuals are recognized as worthy of consideration uniquely when showing an interest in matters that are abstract and completely disconnected from the historical-political and socio-cultural context in which they live, remaining in this way sheepishly in the service of power⁶. The duty of the intellectual, according to Pasolini, is exactly

the opposite: to bring to the surface, to denounce and criticize with bravery those circumstances of injustice, discrimination and inequality that they, more than anybody else, are able to highlight and analyze.

Being an “engaged intellectual” means, first and foremost, to have the courage to be such, and for the ethnographer it defines a commitment; if not to a specific class, then certainly to a cause which, though not necessarily seeing him involved in first person, overwhelms him morally and ethically. We do not need to ask ourselves if we are researchers before being activists, but we should start from the premise that the ethnographer is firstly a woman or a man who comes into other people’s lives, participates in their ordeals, and cannot avoid measuring himself against them.

All this acquires an even stronger connotation when having to deal with disasters, which, having utterly shattered the surroundings and everyday lives of those involved, are such as to bring to the fore dynamics that it is difficult to remain indifferent to. This is because the catastrophe is not only passively endured, but also actively reconfigured by the different individuals involved, coherently with their socio-cultural models, and its interpretation becomes part of a collective discourse that involves various individualities in the negotiation of its meanings.

Engaged anthropology can and has to be an open resource, an instrument of knowledge and criticism, aimed at dismantling the hegemonic axes over which lay the foundations of the world we live in, and directed at the creation of new journeys. As critical knowledge, it can be used as an instrument of self-reflection by the different subjectivities on stage. By developing a “participatory” account the engaged researcher must be conscious of the power of his words and must be able to use his ability to be listened to in order to promote change in some strategies with the aim of making the performative process enacted by the social actors more efficient.

If it is true that in order to be more empathically consistent with the individual’s experiential surroundings one needs to be close to the events, to be personally involved, what stimulated and enriched me during my research is having shared glimpses of life experiences with people who, however much the earthquake had ripped them apart, have tenaciously expressed their own exilient will to turn this into an opportunity to open up their futures to new possibilities. I was able to measure myself against a journey of struggles which produces specific claims as attempts to escape one’s own conditions of suffering and one’s own precariousness through specific battles. From all of this, the researcher can learn a lesson, not only from a professional point of

view but also, and above all, from a personal one; we are, after all, people first and foremost. If translating these new realities, with all their complexities and historical power, into an action which leads to emancipation is a task which can no longer be disregarded, the matter of the ethnographer's gaining of consciousness, of his being a mediator between two worlds but at the same time being a political actor in the overthrowing of power, is another urgent point on which to reflect.

4. Conclusions

What is to retain finally of this arrangement? My awareness of the contractual nature of my relationship with the subjects, of the possibility that I could be used by the actors to promote a particular vision of the dynamics, together with the fact that the field is always the result of collaboration, mimesis, conflict or congenialities among ethnographers and informers (Mahon 2000), all prompted a process of self-critique and the development of doubts on the validity of my work. Nevertheless, if – as Colombo (1998) states – it is true that the ethnographer uses himself as an instrument for surveying a shared scenario, to paraphrase (Piasere 2002), it could be said that the process of ethnographic interpretation must be considered as a particular type of experiment; an experiment of experience. Since the latter is an ethnographic meeting point, it is indeed within its very core that a reflectiveness develops in a dual and mutual sense. On one hand, the ethnographer's (self) reflection regarding his own positioning, which is determined by his disruptive presence through which he, knowing himself, knows others (*Ibidem*). The knowledge thus obtained *perduttivamente* through dialogue, sharing, spending time together and through *risonanza* (Piasere 2002), leads to an understanding of the meaning of "other", negotiated because it is a result of the meeting between the ethnographic point of view – an expression of the effort to understand the point of view of the other, and the latter. On the other hand, the "disruptive anthropologist" compels the subjects to reflect on and discuss themselves and their own culture, their own practices and strategies: this reflection can give rise to a process which triggers mutative mechanisms for re-defining and/or improving the socio-political-cultural structures (Fabietti 1999).

Practising a reflective anthropology in this double sense is what permits the researcher to give a practical contribution, by providing an interpretation of reality founded on a "hermeneutic unit produced between the ethnographer, as subject of knowledge, and those studied, as objects of

knowledge" (Josephides 1997). However, to practice reflectiveness also means to choose one's own methodologies according to the context and the relationships produced in the fieldwork. For this reason I decided to explain my positioning within the dynamic being studied. Furthermore, I was driven to take this research project forward by the desire (perhaps an unrealistic one) that my ethnography could give a practical contribution to the Committee's cause and support it (Angel Ajani - Sanford 2006; Rossi 2008).

Paraphrasing Borofsky (2005), we could claim that the ethnographer needs this explanation in order to define the limits and critical aspects of his research. The latter can also lead him to ask himself how the public can benefit from his study, about the ethical preconditions of the research, of the elaboration and of the divulgation of ethnographic data and about his own responsibilities towards the individuals with whom he carries out his research.

The practice of reflectiveness must be articulated in various ways, depending on the ethnographic context and the relationships that are created within it. The possible types of anthropology are numerous, as are the ethnographic ways of carrying forward fieldwork. With what is stated herein, we do not want to claim that one method is more valid than another but to present one of the many ways of practicing ethnography. Whether this method has produced a scientifically and anthropologically valid work or not is yet to be demonstrated. In my specific case, all of this was inevitable.

Notes

¹ Neologism coined by the author: cf. unpublished PhD Dissertation, Pitzalis Silvia, *Catastrofi generative e spazi del politico. Un'etnografia partecipata del terremoto emiliano*, anno 2015, Università degli Studi di Bologna, tutor: Luca Jourdan.

² The *Bassa modenese* is that portion of the *Pianura Padana*, in the Modena locality, adjoined to the Veneto and Lombardy regions, one of the localities most affected by the earthquake of May 2012.

³ Internet source: www.protezionecivile.gov.it/jcms/it/view_new.wp?contentId=NEW33237. Last access occurred in May 2015.

⁴ *Sisma.12*'s charter can be found at web page <http://sismapuntododici.blogspot.it/p/la-mission-del-comitato.html>. Last access occurred in April 2015.

⁵ This is the Committee's slogan.

⁶ Cfr. the article appeared on the *Manifesto* newspaper on 13th November 2014, written by Alberto Burgio and titled *Pasolini, quel sapere impotente*.

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