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From Border to Border: Refugee Solidarity Activism in Italy Across Space, Time, and Practices

Lorenzo Zamponi

Introduction

Second only to Greece, Italy is the ‘country of first arrival’ for many refugees who come to Europe by sea: in 2015, of the one million refugees who crossed the Mediterranean, 154,000 landed in Italy. Most of them came from sub-Saharan Africa (in particular Nigeria and the former Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somalia), Syria, and Bangladesh. This chapter reconstructs, through the analysis of 21 qualitative interviews with activists in solidarity with refugees, the different forms of action, including both protest and solidarity initiatives, that have emerged during the ‘long summer of migration’ along the Italian migrant route, linking them to various opportunities and threats.

L. Zamponi (✉)

Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences, Scuola Normale Superiore,
Firenze, Italy

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I use three keys to address the issue of refugee solidarity activism: space, time, and practices. After reviewing the literature on the issue (Sect. “[Background: Social Movements and Asylum](#)”) and the Italian context (Sect. “[Case and Methods](#)”), quickly mapping the actors and actions under analysis (Sect. “[Refugee Solidarity Activism in Italy](#)”), the chapter focuses (Sect. “[Practices: Protest and Direct Social Action](#)”) on practices, pointing out the relevance of direct social action (Bosi and Zamponi 2015), concrete solidarity initiatives in an emergency context, and their relationship with politics-oriented episodes of mobilisation. The following Sects. analyse how these practices diverge across space and time. With regard to space (Sect. “[Space: Borders and Opportunities](#)”), the analysis shows that different places, independently of their position along the route relative to the border, took on the role of borders, due to the expression of state power in blocking the migrants’ path. This dynamic shapes the political opportunities for collective action, implying the centrality of the state as the movement’s counterpart, creating or removing the emergency situations to which the movement answers and the related political opportunities. Finally, the chapter addresses the visible transition from emergency-based direct social actions to politics-oriented episodes of contention (Sect. “[Time: The Politicisation of Solidarity](#)”), both as a development of previous solidarity action and as a response to initiatives taken by the state and by anti-refugee actors.

Background: Social Movements and Asylum

Social movement studies have produced a limited amount of research on the issue of asylum seekers’ and migrants’ struggles. As Menjivar stated, the relationship between social movements and immigration ‘has remained underdeveloped and thus could stand to benefit from a more active dialog’ (Menjívar 2010). The protests against the anti-immigration bill of 2006 provided a chance to develop a new wave of research on the issue in the United States (Pantoja et al. 2008; Voss and Bloemraad 2011), while in Europe researchers have focused mainly on anti-immigration

action (Giugni et al. 2005; Koopmans and Statham 2000), although with significant exceptions (Giugni and Passy 2004; Koopmans et al. 2005). The recent increase of immigration and asylum requests in Europe has favoured the development of some works both on pro-migrant activism (Monforte 2016; Tazreiter 2010; Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2016) and on migrants' and refugees' struggles (Ataç 2016), but much still needs to be done. In particular, episodes of protest against the deportation of asylum seekers and migrants have been analysed in various European countries such as the United Kingdom (Anderson et al. 2011), Germany (Ellermann 2009), France (Freedman 2009), Austria (Rosenberger and Winkler 2014), and the Netherlands (Versteegt and Maussen 2012).

A different point of view was proposed by Florence Passy (2001) in her essay on the 'solidarity movement', which she defined as a movement in which 'individuals [...] defend the interests, rights, and identities of others' (Passy 2001, p. 5). Among these 'others', she mentioned as the most common examples 'asylum seekers, political refugees, immigrant workers, peoples whose human rights are being infringed, victims of racist acts or sentiments, and populations of Third World countries' (Passy 2001, p. 5). Furthermore, Passy listed 'immigration/asylum and antiracism' as two of the four main areas of intervention by the solidarity movement since the 1980s (Passy 2001, p. 11–12).

A challenging occasion to review, update, and improve this corpus of research is provided by the processes that are taking place in Europe in this historical phase. Since 2015, a rising number of refugees have made the journey to the European Union to seek asylum, travelling across the Mediterranean Sea or through South-Eastern Europe. According to Eurostat, EU member states received over 1.2 million first-time asylum applications in 2015, a number more than double that of the previous year. This phenomenon triggered a series of events and processes in different domains: at the EU level, policies shifted from attempts to address the humanitarian crisis and the dramatic number of deaths at sea to measures aiming to fight human smuggling and to negotiate with Turkey to reduce the inflow; some countries proposed suspending the Schengen Treaty and re-establishing internal border controls; radical right forces

proposed emergency measures to ‘defend the borders’ throughout the continent, sometimes gaining hegemony on the whole political field and dramatically influencing the policies of mainstream parties. In particular, various episodes of collective action took place in different countries: grassroots actions and initiatives in solidarity with refugees, self-organised protests led by the same refugees at the borders and in camps, transnational campaigns demanding changes in European policies, radical right and nationalist protests against the presence of refugees in some communities, and so on.

To address this issue from the point of view of contentious politics means to aim at ‘highlighting the concrete strategies, campaigns, demonstrations, and struggles of refugees and migrants, and those citizens mobilising in solidarity with them [...] in order to make visible the politics of these social movements and inquire into the potentiality of such political struggle’ (Ataç et al. 2016).

Case and Methods

A significant number of asylum seekers arrive in Italy either from Libya, to the small island of Lampedusa or to the Sicilian coast—previously on boats owned by themselves or by smugglers, but now mostly on ships belonging to the Italian government or to international NGOs, which intercept their route—or from Greece, to the coast of Puglia in the Italian Southeast. For most refugees, Italy is a provisional stage in a longer route, since its precarious economic situation makes it less attractive for migrants than the Northern European destinations. For these reasons, the most critical points from a humanitarian point of view are the borders. This includes the sea between Italy and Libya, in which thousands of people have died in shipwrecks over the last few years—the largest of which, on 3 October 2013, triggered the Italian Navy’s ‘Operation Mare Nostrum’, followed by Frontex’s ‘Operation Triton’ in 2014. Also significant are the borders with Austria (particularly the Brenner Pass), France (particularly in Ventimiglia), and Switzerland (particularly between Como and Chiasso).

The choice of neighbouring countries to strengthen the controls at their borders, together with the lack of appropriate structures to accom-

moderate asylum seekers, has increased pressures in these critical areas. The situation is exacerbated by EU governments' requirements to strictly comply with the Dublin regulation, which forces governments to identify refugees as soon as they land and requires refugees to stay in the country in which they arrived. These changes have generated a series of informale refugee camps in various areas of Italy, particularly at the borders (especially in Lampedusa, Ventimiglia, and Como) and around the train stations of the most important cities (especially Rome and Milan).

The reception of refugees and asylum seekers in Italy is handled by three different systems: CARA (Centres of Reception for Asylum Seekers), CAS (Centres of Extraordinary Reception), and SPRAR (System of Protection for Asylum Seekers and Refugees), which answer to the Ministry of the Interior. The local representatives of the Ministry of the Interior, the prefects, are in charge of the structures and camps in which asylum seekers are hosted. These structures are often owned by NGOs or private citizens, who receive government funds.

The situation described above requires methodological choices designed to capture its complexity. This chapter is based on 21 qualitative interviews with activists engaged in different forms of collective action in solidarity with refugees and on participant observation in protests and assemblies. The sampling strategy that was chosen aimed at covering as much as possible the broad and scattered field of activism in solidarity with refugees in Italy.

The main idea was to collect information from people who had been active in different areas of the country, and particularly at different stages along the route: from the refugees' place of arrival, through the big cities, to the borders with the destination countries. Furthermore, the sampling strategy took into account the need to cover a plurality of voices and to interview both people who had started their experience of activism on this particular occasion and those who had been working on the issue for years. Interviewees have been active both at the borders (in the island on Lampedusa, in Ventimiglia, in Como, and at the Brenner Pass) and in Italian cities (Rome, Florence, Bologna, Milan and Padua), belonging both to formal organisations and NGOs and to local collectives.

Refugee Solidarity Activism in Italy

Italy has been a country of destination for foreign migrants since the 1970s. In the last few decades, it has seen a significant presence of migrants' and migration-related political activism, both in the institutional realm and in street politics, as testified by a broad literature (Pilati 2010; Danese 2001; Caponio 2005; Campomori 2008; Mantovan 2007; Mezzadra and Ricciardi 2013; Mantovan 2013; Ambrosini 2013; Marino 2010; Oliveri 2012; Cappiali 2016, 2017, 2015). Nevertheless, the episodes of collective action analysed in this chapter are only partially rooted in this tradition. There is the presence of some structured national organisations that have been active in the mobilisation for migrants' rights for decades, such as ARCI, and of political areas that have been historically part of this field, such as the radical left and post-autonomous social centres, and there are also visible continuities at the discursive and at the biographical level. However, the vast majority of initiatives are situated in a rather limited spatial and temporal context.

Actors involved in actions and initiatives on this issue are rather diverse from the organisational point of view: the sample includes social movement collectives and social centres, local networks of social and political organisations (such as *Como Senza Frontiere* and *Forum Lampedusa Solidale*, two social forum-like local networks), ad hoc local initiatives and campaigns, formal associations, and even some religious organisations.

Some projects see the presence of established actors in the Italian social movement landscape, while in some cases, particularly in the actions and initiatives around informal refugee camps, most activists were new to this kind of experience. These informal camps represented a contingent situation of emergency that triggered a response from activists who tended not to belong to established organisations or networks. Nevertheless, most come from a certain political background, either in the Italian social movement landscape or the Left in general, or in the progressive areas of the Catholic Church. In other cases, those not connected with refugee camps, but with the organisation of protests, ad hoc campaigns, and initiatives, were created by pre-existing actors of the Italian social movement scene.

The organisational structures tend to be strongly localised: given the reactive nature of this kind of action, the response tends to be provided

by local groups and volunteers, depending on the existing infrastructure of the local civil society, and not by political organisations with a national agenda. As already noted, national organisations and networks like ARCI and LasciateCIEntrare are more present in the proactive component of action. A peculiar case is that of the NGO created by the Italian Evangelical Church in Lampedusa, which sent people from the mainland to live on the island and create a new humanitarian initiative from scratch.

Initiatives generally lack national co-ordination: there is no broad and encompassing national campaign for solidarity with refugees. This condition resonates with the scattered nature of the Italian social movement landscape (Zamponi and González 2017), after a few years without common mobilisations able to create a common space (i.e. social forums, student mobilisations 2008–2011, etc.). The ‘no border’ area (mainly composed of anarchist and radical post-autonomous activists)—with assemblies in different cities and activists moving between camps—is, from this point of view, a partial exception. In other cases, relations between different camps have been established during the action, to co-ordinate activities, notify in advance new arrivals from one city to another, and so on. In some cases, these relationships were established through refugees themselves, who often go back and forth many times, every time they try to cross the border.

The form and nature of links between groups in different cities is well explained by two activists of Accoglienza Degna, a collective created by activists of post-autonomous social centres in Bologna:

There is not a proper network at the national level. There are relationships among different realities, for example at the regional level we are strongly linked to Rimini, with an experience similar to ours, thus very often we work together. Then, the Baobab is another reality with which we had meetings, occasions of dialogue, for example we went to some of their meetings in Rome, they came here for meetings to discuss some issues, to compare the different ways in which we work, and so on. Then, we moved, we went to Como, we went to the Brenner Pass when there was the matter of the border, but there is no established network of non-institutional realities engaged in *accoglienza* in Italy, now. (Interview I15)

A similar account is provided by an activist of Baobab Experience, the leading actor of this attempt at national co-ordination, due to the visibility provided by its role as the main collective providing shelter and aid to asylum seekers in Rome:

We exploited the winter to try and make an assembly of all the realities who are working on immigration in an informal way, to create on our own, since the institutions are not succeeding in doing it, sort of a humanitarian corridor at least inside the Italian borders, to make so that if someone disappears, if someone falls in the wrong hands, if someone needs particular assistance, there is a passage of tasks. (Interview I6)

As both quotes show, there is no national co-ordination at the political level, but there are growing attempts to establish links among volunteers active in different cities. The pragmatic nature of these links is coherent with the practice-oriented spirit that characterises many of the actors, as the next section will show.

Practices: Protest and Direct Social Action

The actions and initiatives analysed in this chapter can be roughly divided into two categories: some were actions of protest, thus primarily expressing political claims related to the issue of immigration, while others were direct social actions, primarily offering concrete help to refugees in need. Direct social actions are ‘actions that do not primarily focus upon claiming something from the state or other power holders [...] but that instead focus upon directly transforming some specific aspects of society by means of the very action itself’ (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, p. 369). These are forms of collective action that aim at directly changing, by means of the very action itself, some specific aspects of society without being primarily oriented towards securing the mediation of public authorities or the intervention of other actors. They are ‘direct—that is, aimed at having a non-mediated impact on their object—and they are social—that is, they address society, or at least some parts of it, rather than state authorities or other power-holders’ (Bosi and Zamponi 2015, p. 374).

Groups like the Baobab Experience in Rome, or the volunteers active in the train station in Como, had to spend most of their time and energy addressing emergency situations and providing refugees with food and shelter; other experiences, like the protest at the Brenner Pass, were from the beginning the expression of precise political claims and demands.

With regard to protest, the repertoire includes four main types of action: local protests to denounce the conditions of migrants and demand changes in the reception system (as in the cases of Rome, Como, and Ventimiglia, for example); symbolic actions at the border with other European countries, to denounce the obstacles to the freedom of movement of asylum seekers (as in the cases of the three marches at the Brenner Pass, between Italy and Austria); opinion campaigns to ask for changes in the management of the governmental reception system (as in the case of *LasciateCIEntrare*); and solidarity marches as a response to anti-migrant action (as in the case of the first rally of *Padova Accoglie* in 2015, the demonstration in *Giavera del Montello* in January 2017, and the marches in Milan and Bologna in May 2017). These forms show different levels of contentiousness, often reflecting the different political backgrounds of the groups that organise them, with the different goals they pursue and with the different constituencies they address. In general, there seems to be a rather pragmatic attitude towards the choice of repertoires: some of the same social movement actors that participated in clashes with police at Brenner Pass—where the march was almost completely populated by militants and the main goal was to raise public attention on the issue of the border—also participated in the peaceful rally of *Padova Accoglie*, which involved thousands of unpoliticised individuals and a wide coalition of social actors, including Catholic groups, with the goal of shaping public opinion on migrants at the city level.

The groups and organisations analysed in this chapter enacted a variety of direct social actions: emergency provision of food, clothes, and blankets to migrants who had been blocked; help with communication, including translation services as well as material infrastructure (i.e. working SIM cards and Wi-Fi connections to connect with families at home and contacts in their destination country); management of informal refugee camps (including the provision of tents or other structures); administration of officially recognised reception structures (included in the

SPRAR or CAS systems, in co-operation with the government); hosting of migrants who are outside the official reception system; provision of legal information at different stages of the migrant route (e.g. arrival in Italy, entry into the governmental reception system, expulsion or voluntary exit from the system or country); professional training (both inside and outside official reception channels); organisation of cultural activities (such as meetings with local migrant and indigenous communities, festivals, etc.); missions to help refugees abroad (as in the case of the trip to Idomeni organised by Overthefortress); and creation of officially recognised humanitarian corridors.

It should be noted that this distinction among forms of action does not automatically translate into a distinction among organisations. On the contrary, there are many instances of overlap between the two fields. Protest groups sometimes end up enacting solidarity initiatives, as in the case of Accoglienza Degna, in which activists of a social centre began hosting migrants excluded by the official reception system, or in the cases of Como and Ventimiglia, in which political activists were strongly committed to solidarity actions. Alternatively, people and organisations initially involved only in solidarity initiatives may ultimately engage in protest actions. Examples include the case of Baobab Experience, whose activists started protesting only when public authorities tried to shut down their solidarity initiative; Padova Accoglie, a protest group whose spokespersons had been managing reception structures; and the demonstration in Giavera del Montello, called by organisers of a cultural festival who had never organised a protest before.

An activist from ARCI interprets this overlap between solidarity and protest as part of a more general trend:

The anti-racist movement is a movement that now is scattered. From my point of view this is linked with the general barbarisation of our society, from which the anti-racist movement is not immune. [...] On this issue, but not only on this issue, we try to fight a feeling of loneliness of people, that hit also the anti-racist movement. [...] Now the good examples are more on 'doing' than on mobilising. But this does not happen only on immigration. I come from Genoa, where there are often floods. Every time that there is a flood, you see boys and girls with shovels come out and help.

They are called ‘the angels of mud’. When you see it happening, once, twice, always, you are not surprised any more. This is an example of the fact that in this country there is still activism on the level on ‘doing’. Maybe we should ask ourselves how to allow people to ‘do’, to make themselves useful for their community. Probably we have passed from a more political mobilisation to a mobilisation of ‘doing’. (Interview I14)

Space: Borders and Opportunities

The opportunities for mobilisation are created in most cases by the interaction between a specific spatial setting (an island in the middle of the Mediterranean, a train station in the centre of a big city, a border town) and some initiative taken by a specific actor, most often a government (closing a border, opening a detention centre, dismantling an informal camp).

Most of the actions and initiatives addressed in the research are characterised by a reactive and contingent nature. A significant part of the activists that were interviewed mobilised in response to some ‘emergency’, some humanitarian crisis involving a number of refugees in need of food and shelter due to the obstacles on the migrant route and the lack of action on the part of the Italian government. Most of the actions by the interviewees were the direct answer to an unprecedented number of refugees being stopped along their route by authorities and, due to the inaction of the government, forming spontaneous camps, usually close to train stations. The experience of these informal camps is the context of some of the most interesting initiatives. The following quotes provide clear examples of this mechanism: the creation of an obstacle on the migrant route generates a humanitarian emergency in a certain place, the news spreads, and people gather to help.

During the summer of 2016, after the Swiss government’s decision to intensify controls at the border, hundreds of migrants were sent back to the closest Italian city, Como, where the train station was soon crowded with people. The informal camp quickly started to draw activists and volunteers, triggering a phase of collective action—including both direct social action and protest—that lasted several weeks, until the opening of

an official governmental camp. A similar story had taken place one year earlier in Rome, when an informal camp set up by migrants who had not succeeded in leaving the country was dismantled by the police: migrants moved close to the Tiburtina train station and started camping in the area, and activists and volunteers started showing up, giving birth to the so-called Baobab Experience. Activists from both groups tend to tell their story in a rather similar way:

In July we were told by people we know that there were some migrants in the train station that had been blocked there for a few days, mostly Ethiopian and Eritrean, because Switzerland had closed the border. Before, the flux was constant, people passed, then when Switzerland decided to close, people were stopped in Como, and thus we started to bring them food, blankets, clothes, and we did it for the whole July. (Interview I8)

On 11 May 2015 they dismantled the camp in Ponte Mammolo without having an alternative. There were 400 people, mainly migrants in transit, with a big Eritrean component, but not only them, there were caregivers from Eastern Europe that, given that they could not afford a place to stay, they stayed there. The camp was destroyed without involving no social organisation. Many migrants came here, close to the train station, and some time later, for security reasons linked to the G7 summit in Germany, Schengen was suspended. Thus, people remained blocked here. The people of the neighbourhood complain, the police send away the people and send them in this direction. [...] Then, a 'solidarity machine' starts, mainly through social media. The first to get active are the people of the San Lorenzo neighbourhood, and the social centres there, organising collection points and bringing here food and clothes. And then volunteers start to arrive. (Interview I6)

The reactive nature of many of these initiatives is also made clear by the time references activists use. When asked about periodisation, activists tend to refer to stages that were dictated by governmental programmes and governmental decisions: in Lampedusa, they say 'when Mare Nostrum ended' (Interview I2) or 'then Triton started' (Interview I3), referring to the navy operations in the Mediterranean Sea, while in Como

they say ‘when Switzerland closed to border’ (Interview I10). An activist interviewed in Como had previously been in Ventimiglia, moving from one border town to another following the evolution of a migration flow related to state decisions to close the border:

In the moment in which on the Brenner Pass some controls were introduced, in Ventimiglia the situation was what it was, with a total militarisation and a new deportation every day, people started moving here [to Como]. We had already been seeing it since the Spring. (Interview I10)

In both cases mentioned in the three quotes, Como and Rome, a state decision influences a specific spatial setting, creating an ‘emergency’ situation that triggers mobilisation. People are drawn towards that emergency situation: they start to help, and this individual help gradually becomes collective action, as we will see later. The state’s decision to close a border or to dismantle an informal camp creates in a certain area a situation of ‘emergency’, which makes visible what was already happening without people noticing it. As an activist in Como noted, before the Swiss government closed the border and migrants started camping in the train station, ‘probably their numbers were even higher, but nobody was noticing it’ (Interview I8). The flow of migrants is not an emergency *in se*, and it does not imply collective action in itself: people realise that there is an emergency and that their action is required when something happens that breaks the status quo.

These situations of ‘emergency’ are situated at different stages of the migrant route. Lampedusa is the place of the *accoglienza* (a very common word in the Italian public discourse on the issue; interestingly enough, it means both a warm ‘welcoming’ and a neutral ‘reception’) where for years the primary task has been to keep migrants alive. Rome and the other Italian cities are mainly places of passage, where migrants are stopped for some reason (mainly, they have been identified and thus sent back when they reach the border) and from which they try to leave as soon as they can. From Como, Ventimiglia, and the other borders with European countries, migrants are trying to depart towards their destination country. Nevertheless, an observably similar dynamic takes place in all these different stages: a governmental decision blocks the migrant route and

creates an ‘emergency situation’. From this point of view, not only Lampedusa, Como, and Ventimiglia but also Rome is on a ‘border’. As Pierre Monforte noted, ‘[t]he border is now extended across the territory, creating multiple zones of vulnerability’ for migrants (Monforte 2016, p. 424). ‘This means that the binary demarcation between the inside and the outside is blurred and that the specific governmental practices and technologies that were once situated at the edges of territories can now be encountered all over the territories’ (Monforte 2016, p. 416). State decisions make certain geographical spaces into borders, thus creating, through the dynamics of ‘emergency’ and the appearance of informal camps, spaces for collective action, particularly for direct social action. Responding to the ‘emergency’ is so urgent that anything else must be postponed, as we will see in following section.

On the other hand, in spaces that do not have the characteristics of a ‘border’, actions are not directly shaped by the urgent needs of migrants and indirectly by the state decisions that created the emergency. Instead, they tend to be more directly political and claim-oriented, either reacting to anti-migrant actions or being proactive. In fact, emergency situations are not the only phenomena to which activists react: some actions, especially in the case of protest, are organised in reaction to anti-migrant initiatives. The Padova Accoglie rally, on 15 May 2015—from which the network with the same name was born—was organised explicitly in response to the anti-refugee demonstration called by then mayor Massimo Bitonci (Lega Nord). The same was true at the Montello, a hill in the Province of Treviso, in the north-east of the country: a local committee of citizens, with the support of the Lega Nord and the far-right party Forza Nuova, organised an anti-refugee demonstration in December in the small town of Volpago to protest the hosting of refugees in a former military barracks. In response, the organisers of a local multi-cultural festival planned a counter-demonstration in January in the small town of Giavera. The decision to organise the march as a reaction is explained well by the spokesperson of the association *Ritmi e danze dal mondo*:

We heard of this march in a small town here in the area, and we immediately realised that the style was worrying. Then, reading the newspaper, I said ‘No, I can’t accept something like this. It is circulating all over the

country, in the newspapers, on TV. Montello is also something else.' I agree on the fact that it is not fair to put people like this in a barrack, but I can't bear hearing people saying 'We have to burn everything', if you tolerate words like these, someone will act, and this can't be accepted. So, we decided to do a march. (Interview I19)

A more *proactive* approach can be seen in the initiatives of actors like ARCI or the national campaign *LasciateCIEntrare*, which were active on the topic much before the latest wave of arrival of refugees. These groups tend to bring a more long-term perspective to the issue and to focus more on structural solutions for the reform of the Italian immigration system than on the need for immediate relief in a particular emergency situation.

Time: The Politicisation of Solidarity

In her essay on the 'solidarity movement', Florence Passy observed that, in the context of the emergence of the new social movements since the 1970s, the solidarity movement has undergone a deep transformation:

The movement organizations gave the disadvantaged material and moral assistance, providing them with food, clothes, legal advice, and so forth. While most of the organizations of the new solidarity movement still provide this kind of assistance, now their actions also include political claim-making addressed to power holders. In other words, their traditional assistance-oriented praxis is now paralleled by a political praxis based on the same political cleavage in which the other new social movements are anchored. (Passy 2001, p. 2011)

To say that this observation accurately depicts all the actors involved in solidarity with refugees in Italy would be an overstatement. However, the relationship between the solidarity-oriented component (what we have called 'direct social action') and the political component of collective action is interesting to analyse, in particular from the diachronic point of view.

In fact, if many episodes of collective action are triggered by emergency situations, their nature will change with the development of the emergency. Many activists interviewed describe an initial situation in which they were too overwhelmed by the everyday tasks of direct social action required by the emergency to think about politics and the political needs of their initiative. An activist of Baobab Experience testifies that weeks had passed from the beginning of their action to their first assembly:

Then, when the Ponte Mammolo camp was dismantled, in mid-May, and then more when the Tiburtina station camp was dismantled, a few people start showing up, Roman citizens, including me, people that did not know each other. There was no organised collective, no social centre that took charge of handling this, it was a melting pot of people of different backgrounds, from the old lady of Piazza Bologna to the high school kid. People showed up here and started organising the best they could, in a situation of emergency. So I arrived in mid-June and we did our first assembly and the end of June, because it the beginning we had to provide for the urgent needs rather than organising in a structured way, because if you have 600 people outside for breakfast and you do not have milk, the first thing you say is: 'Ok, let us think about the milk, and then we will do the assembly and decide the programmatic stuff'. (Interview I6)

This condition, in which the urgency of direct social action becomes an obstacle for politics, is described with visible frustration by activists with longer-term involvement. Particularly in Lampedusa, where taking care of the urgent needs of refugees has been part of the daily lives of activists for years, some participants have developed a rather critical view of direct social action. Thus a Lampedusa-based activist, after many years of engagement in solidarity-oriented actions, developed the idea that only political protest can really make a difference and that handling emergencies is a trap that weakens the political capacity of civil society:

There are many movements that deal mainly with emergency. This is something we did many years ago, before others, with situations that have not taken place in [the rest of] Italy yet, because in 2011 here there were 6000 Tunisians in a 6000-inhabitants island. [...] We lived this phase in complete

loneliness, not for someone's fault but because being on an island means being alone, and this is something that, in hindsight, we did not face properly. In a situation of emergency, if you don't have a somewhat political view, you end up not building nothing. In hindsight, with a clear mind, that nobody among us had in those two months in 2011, you realise that we should have done something different. Giving food to the guys, giving them blankets, letting them charge their phones, getting them the money that arrived from Tunisia, etc., kept us busy, in terms of time and energy, and kept us from reflecting on the need to denounce and from inventing solutions. I do not know what are the solutions, but I know that if something like this happened again, I would not go there to distribute clothes, but I would stay at home thinking about doing something different. We should have convinced the fishermen to bring them all to Sicily, a mass action that would have been difficult to frame in terms of 'abetment of clandestine immigration'. I said this because I have the feeling that this reflexion, to which we arrived on the base of the experience we lived, is what is lacking in other places now. Not everywhere: for example, No Borders at least are protesting, are denouncing the situation, the demonstrations at the borders, and so on. For me this is fundamental. I got to think that emergency is the best way to neutralise civil society: you keep it busy in cooking pasta and cous-cous, bringing people to the hospital, etc., and you get rid of it, you get rid of a problem. (Interview I4)

A radical collective on the same island has developed an even more critical attitude to direct social action and, more in general, to everything related to what they call the 'humanitarian' approach to the issue of immigration. In their recollection, they were too busy trying to directly help migrants to really understand the migratory phenomenon. Since the government has taken over the tasks of rescuing and assisting migrants on the island, activists have been able to reflect and to elaborate. As a result, they have changed their attitude, from a 'humanitarian' to a more critical anti-capitalist approach.

We started with a humanitarian approach, for this reason we have to make an effort to understand those that, in good faith, have those positions. But with the experience we lived and with studying, we have developed a more advanced position on the issue of immigration. [...] We link the growth of the dispositive of immigration control with the implementation of the

military dispositive. The two things need to be read together, thus we see a big limit in the classic humanitarian approach. Because the humanitarian approach ends up justifying *Mare Nostrum* in the name of rescue. If you do not have a reading of the situation that makes you see that the migratory emergency is created on purpose as a Schmittian state of exception, it is a continuously reproduced event that allows the political power to justify the implementation of the military dispositive, without this reading it is obvious that you will have the apparently pragmatic approach that will make you say 'ok, but we have to save them, so even *Mare Nostrum* is ok' [...]. In 2011 we were there cooking, giving clothes, etc., now there is a different situation. (Interview 15)

There is a visible transition from solidarity-oriented direct social actions to political protest. This process is often helped by the end of the emergency itself or by the intervention of the state in addressing it.

Both for the really diverse nature of the people that participated and for the fact of meeting in a situation already of emergency, it took time to get to approaches that addressed the issue from a general and critical point of view. Many people came here because they wanted to give a toothbrush to a child, and from there we explained them, we made them understand that those people needed a toothbrush because there were a series of European laws that prohibited their transit, that did not welcome them. Or, even more, we could get to 'But do you know that in Eritrea there is a dictatorship?', and so there was a growth from this point of view. It took some time to pass from solidarity to a more critical point of view. (Interview 16)

Initially we focused above all on this [providing food and blankets]. Then we started, in parallel, activities that addressed the citizens, to explain what the problem was, to try to raise awareness. [...] When the governmental camp opened, in September, the situation changed and our activity changed. We cannot enter the camp, and so we go around the city trying to help the people that our outside the camp, we still participate in the meetings with the municipality, we try to raise awareness on this issue. [...] The idea is to shed light on this problem to change the public perception. (Interview 18)

If state decisions were in most cases what created the emergency situation that triggered solidarity-oriented collective action, the choice by the

state to directly address that emergency pushes activists to shift their focus to more claim-oriented political activities. This process of gradual shift from direct social action to political protest is visible in several cases in the Italian context. Furthermore, the more the state intervenes on the issue and anti-refugee actors do the same, the more the people engaged in solidarity with refugees will be pushed to take political stances on state intervention and on anti-refugee actions. Moreover, often the same actors that were previously involved in direct social actions decide to take to the streets. In fact, the Spring of 2017 was characterised by a series of marches in which the most moderate actors addressed the issue of the increasing anti-migrant propaganda, instead proposing 'welcoming' as a sensible attitude towards asylum seekers. The most radical components strongly criticised the 46/2017 law (the so-called Minniti-Orlando Law, from the names of the two ministers that inspired it) passed by parliament in April 2017—which, among other things, changed the judicial procedure for asylum seekers. The Accoglienza Degna collective in Bologna, which had been active in hosting migrants, was among the organisers of a 'March for Welcoming—No one is illegal' on 27 May 2017. A larger initiative was taken in Milan by a member of the local administration, inspired by a similar event in Barcelona on 18 February: on 20 May 2017, more than one hundred thousand people took to the streets. Interestingly enough, the march saw the participation of the 'No one is illegal' network, formed by actors in the social movement milieu that were critical towards the government-friendly stances of the main organisers. As an activist reported during the demonstration, 'the core group in *No one is illegal* is Naga, an association that has been working for years with migrants, organising judicial assistance, healthcare support and so on. This gives them legitimacy on this issue and everybody refer to them' (Interview I21). Once again, direct social action provides connections and legitimacy that become relevant in the organisation of political action.

Nevertheless, the transition from solidarity-oriented to protest-oriented initiatives is not ubiquitous in the movement scene. In a regional assembly of movements in solidarity with migrants in Padua in January 2017, the balance between the two aspects was one of the main issues of debate. Some activists pushed for more open battle in the public sphere: 'We have to fight against detention camps, to convince, to make good

practices of reception emerge in public opinion', stated one activist, while another responded, 'We made very few public statements. We are for closing detentions camps, but we have to focus on producing alternatives. We have to create the conditions for a better reception in the city. We are against doing *Padova protesta* ('Padua protests'), we want to do *Padova accoglie* ('Padua welcomes')'. The same activist also explained his view during an interview:

We think that the most fruitful reception, in the guys' interest, is the one of medium size, between 20 and 40 people. Since none of them gets asylum, if you have six people isolated in a house and their asylum request is denied, they get depressed. [...] We opened a restaurant in which 13 of them work. [...] This is the only thing that beats the awful campaign, the racism. If you show them working, you shake the prejudice of people. Having 2000 people come to our restaurant and see that there is a practical experience of integration is the best possible political intervention. [...] I get angry with some comrades, that make great battles, great protests that are completely useless. [...] The only way to eliminate the camps is to build an alternative. My goal is to solve the problems of these guys. We want to build paths that allow them in a short time to stand on their own two feet. [...] Social enterprise is much more useful than protest. (Interview I20)

Conclusions

This chapter reconstructs the dynamics of Refugee Solidarity Activism in Italy since 2015, focusing mainly on practices, and analyses their variation across space and time. The analysis reveals the presence of a broad set of actors and initiatives, the characteristics of which are strongly shaped by existing political opportunities at the local level—in terms of decisions and interventions by the state or by anti-refugee actors, as well as geographic position along the migrant route. In particular, the fact that many of the actions analysed in the chapter were triggered by situations of emergency pushed activists in an early stage towards direct social actions in response to the most urgent needs of refugees. Further interventions by the state and anti-refugee actors, together with a common feeling of frustration among activists with

longer-term engagement in solidarity actions, have created the conditions for transition to a phase characterised by more visible and contentious political participation.

Direct social actions tend to appear in spaces that take on the characteristics of borders, even when, as in the case of Rome, they are geographically situated inside the national territory. At these borders, the migrant route is blocked by state decisions, triggering the situation of ‘emergency’ that shapes a very peculiar form of collective action—mainly solidarity oriented and focusing on the urgent needs of migrants. In other parts of the country, where collective action emerges either as a reaction to anti-migrant action or proactively, it tends to take on a more claim-oriented approach. Thus, space, as modified by political decisions, shapes the opportunity for mobilisation, influencing the forms of action and consequently the composition of the movement.

In more general terms, the chapter sheds light on the evolution of a solidarity movement, pointing out that different practices may be attached to similar issues, their evolution strongly related to the development of political opportunities. Furthermore, it investigates the dialectical relationship between direct social action and political contention, illustrating that forms of action focusing on solidarity are interpreted by activists both as obstacles to political action and distractions from the struggle and as opportunities to develop political action, gain legitimacy, and address a broader constituency.

Interviews

- I1: Interview with #overthefortress activist, Padua, 28 May 2016.
- I2: Interview with Mediterranean Hope activist, Lampedusa, 2 August 2016.
- I3: Interview with Mediterranean Hope activist, Lampedusa, 2 August 2016.
- I4: Interview with Forum Lampedusa Solidale activist, Lampedusa, 4 August 2016.
- I5: Interview with Askavusa activist, Lampedusa, 5 August 2016.
- I6: Interview with Baobab Experience activist, Rome, 25 August 2016.

- I7: Interview with EUI Refugees Initiative activist, Florence, 10 November 2016.
- I8: Interview with Como senza frontiere activist, Como, 11 November 2016.
- I9: Interview with Como senza frontiere activist, Como, 11 November 2016.
- I10: Interview with Solidali activist, Como, 11 November 2016.
- I11: Interview with activist of informal solidarity group, Como, 12 November 2016.
- I12: Interview with Missionari Comboniani activist, Como, 12 November 2016.
- I13: Interview with LasciateCIEntrare activist, Rome, 19 January 2017.
- I14: Interview with ARCI activist, Rome, 21 January 2017.
- I15: Interview with Accoglienza Degna activist, Bologna, 25 January 2017.
- I16: Interview with Accoglienza Degna activist, Bologna, 25 January 2017.
- I17: Interview with Accoglienza Degna activist, Bologna, 25 January 2017.
- I18: Interview with Accoglienza Degna activist, Bologna, 25 January 2017.
- I19: Interview with Ritmi e danze dal mondo activist, Giavera del Montello (TV), 27 January 2017.
- I20: Interview with Padova Accoglie activist, Padova, 30 January 2017.
- I21: Interview with student activist, Milan, 20 May 2017.

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