Venice Is Not Dying
A Collective Book

Maurizio Busacca, Beatrice Gervasi,
Eleonora Girotti, Emma Maria Rossi

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Maurizio Busacca, Beatrice Gervasi, Eleonora Girotti, Emma Maria Rossi

Abstract

This collective book challenges the pervasive narrative of a dying Venice, arguing instead that the city is experiencing a profound crisis from which signs of rebirth are emerging. Through a collection of four essays, the volume investigates the 'wicked problems' facing the city, from overtourism and depopulation to environmental degradation and social inequality. Adopting interdisciplinary perspectives, the authors apply critical theoretical frameworks to analyze how global market forces impact the local urban fabric. The book moves beyond diagnosis to explore tangible forms of resistance and alternative pathways. Case studies on the resilient neighborhood of Santa Marta and the work of social cooperatives integrating inmates into the local economy showcase bottom-up initiatives that foster social infrastructure, inclusion, and a more sustainable urban life. Ultimately, *Venice Is Not Dying* presents a counter-narrative of a city actively fighting for its future, highlighting the vital role of community, social innovation, and the reclamation of urban space as a living, inhabitable place rather than a mere tourist commodity. Born from the "Economic Sociology" course held by Professor Busacca within the PISE (Philosophy, International Studies, and Economics) program at Ca' Foscari University of Venice and written with three talented students, this collective book is the result of a pedagogical approach to teaching economic sociology inspired by pragmatism and experimentalism, where sociology becomes a source of practical solutions to real problems.

Keywords Venice. Overtourism. Urban resilience. Social innovation. Community. Social cooperatives. Urban anthropology. Problem-solving sociology.

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Venice Is Not Dying
A Collective Book

Preface

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Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Is Venice dying? The prevailing narrative around the present and future of the city is that of an inevitable decline. The authors of the collective volume *Venice Is Not Dying* challenge this narrative, arguing instead that Venice is undergoing a profound crisis, in which complex challenges – ranging from depopulation and overtourism to environmental risks – coexist with areas of resilience and potential revitalization.

The first chapter, by Maurizio Busacca, establishes the scope of the crisis, noting that while cities traditionally die through attack, conquest, or loss of memory (Settis 2014), Venice is currently facing a convergence of these destructive forces alongside the additional threat from climate change and subsequent rising sea levels. At the same time, Venice is endowed with key resources and shows potential for rebirth across economic, social, and physical dimensions. Noteworthy, the elements of this critical puzzle act as both a primary resource and a dominant constraint, as in the paradigmatic case of the development of the tourism sector. This dominance absorbs political and economic resources, fostering low-value-added sectors

characterized by precarious and poorly compensated employment, which in turn leads to social and spatial segregation.

Eleonora Girotti, in chapter 2, provides a reading of the crisis in terms of Nancy Fraser's (2022) Cannibal Capitalism framework: the insatiable need for profit and expansion devours the very extra-economic background conditions it relies on to exist, such as the city's identity and history, the work of care, nature, and political participation.

After displaying the extension, complexity and depth of the crises, the book also searches for possibilities to counter these destructive forces in daily-life, and in economic and political forms of resistance. First, signs of vitality are found in micro daily practices as shown in the third chapter. Here, Beatrice Gervasi, by digging into the everyday life of a venetian neighbourhood, looks for spatial and social counter-trends to the pressures of the multiple crises to find the persistence of a local community fuelled by dense interactions and rituals. Second, the research shows the vitality of "alternative" economic structures which work as "counter movements" in a polanyian sense, as shown in chapter 4, by Emma Maria Rossi: social cooperatives balancing market sustainability with a core mission of social inclusion and rehabilitation. Third, traces of resistance are found in grass-roots social and political participation, either directed to specific or transversal and aimed at resisting commodification and reclaiming the city by proposing economic diversification, public welfare, an ecological vision, democratic autonomy and participation as ways out (chapter 2). These seem to exist and thrive not by directly challenging the titan of mass tourism on its own terms (scale, speed, profit), but by cultivating high-density, relational environments which the forces of commercialization find difficult to penetrate or commodify without destroying the very resource they seek to exploit.

Against this background, it is clear that determining whether Venice is dying or not is not straightforward. Much depends on the extent to which the niches and forms or micro resistance highlighted in the book are able to expand, acquire critical mass, find representation, foster systemic change and institutionalize. Adding to the complexities illustrated in the volume, it is important to acknowledge that Venice's crises (as well as leverage for change) do not pertain to the city exclusively. Venice is unique, but it is not an anomaly. Other historical and cultural cities experience overtourism or the effects of climate change, in Italy and elsewhere. Depopulation and the expulsion of lower-middle classes from city centres is not specific to Venice. The city is rather an exceptional location where several problems (and resources) converge and, above all, where broader structural issues characterizing Italian society, policy and politics are amplified and made evident. Demographic decline, difficult transitions to adulthood, gender and social inequalities,

accessibility to and quality of housing, work, care in the city reflect wider, systemic contradictions, magnified by its specific urban and socio-economic dynamics. This makes the crises deeper and, at the same time, weakens the possibilities for a bottom-up approach able to become systemic. Acknowledging this requires embedding Venice's story in a wider institutional and policy context.

The historical city of Venice and the islands have been losing inhabitants since the aftermath of WWII. If the exodus has become less prominent since the 1980s, the depopulation has been increasingly the results of decreasing birth rates (Favero 2004; 2012). This parallels and highlights more general trends: demographers have shown that Italy's current birth crisis is caused by a combination of two phenomena. On the one hand, women, on average, are having fewer children than desired. At the same time, the low birth rates of the 1980s and 1990s have led to a progressive thinning out of the cohorts of women entering their reproductive years (ages 20-40), structurally reducing the maximum potential pool of births, even if the fertility rate per woman were to slightly increase (Rosina 2021). Also in Venice, the thinning of the very young population is the result of the delay of childbearing choices and of the thinning of the young adult (female) population. If the second factor is structural and cannot be reversed in the short run, the first one resents from a combination of institutional and policy conditions that *can* be influenced. The Italian institutional framework and policies have created a highly segmented labour market that systemically directs young people toward instability, limited career opportunities, and economic vulnerability (Alderotti et al. 2025; Barbieri, Cutuli 2021). At the same time, the welfare system – traditionally oriented to the protection from labour market risks of (typically male, adult, core) workers and neglecting "new" social risks – contributes to the fragilization of the younger generations and of women. According to a prevailing familistic approach, the primary responsibility for care provision (for children, non-self-sufficient elderly, or individuals with disabilities) and the financial support of younger generations falls largely upon families, often being neglected by public policies (Saraceno, Naldini 2013). Beginning in the 1980s, significant demographic shifts (such as population aging and declining mortality rates) and social transformations (including female emancipation and evolving family structures) have subjected the Italian welfare model to intense pressure (Paci 2015). Owing to persistent austerity measures, political processes often showing limited sensitivity to social dynamics, and systemic difficulties stemming from exceedingly complex governance and low administrative efficacy, the system has exhibited notable resistance to reform (Busilacchi, Morlicchio 2024; Da Roit, Sabatinelli 2013; Agostini, Natali 2016; Ranci et al. 2024; Ronchi, Cigna 2024). This institutional inertia has resulted in

a collection of persistent fragilities across the entire country, albeit with regional and local variations which include persistently low (though increasing) female labour market participation, significant challenges for younger cohorts in the transition to independent adulthood; the difficulty in reconciling professional and family life, particularly for working women; and profound inequalities regarding job security and access to social protection (Pace, Raitano 2021; Raitano 2020; Leone, Membretti 2023; Dordoni 2022). These are the general ingredients of the uncertainty of employment and life trajectories among the younger generations, which in Venice are exacerbated by the local (tourist-base) economy and unique urban setting.

A number of vicious circles are therefore at play. The younger generations and particularly women – who could make a difference for the future of Venice (and beyond), demographically, socially, economically – are those who are suffering more from the current situation and, as a consequence, also possess less resources for mobilisation and for boosting structural change – in Venice and beyond.

The hypothesis we can make is that the survival of Venice *needs* the emergence and diffusion of localised and specific forms of resistance and action like the ones spotted by the contributions to this book, but this is unlikely to suffice. A policy effort able to look in a transversal and comprehensive way at life trajectories and urban development embedded in a more favourable work and welfare environment would possibly help.

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Author's Notes

The essays collected in this volume are the outcome of are our academic research for the writing of our final thesis within the course Philosophy, International and Economic Studies at Ca' Foscari University of Venice. They were shaped by the intersection of theoretical study, critical observation of reality, and the stimulating exchange with professors and peers, which constantly nurtured our curiosity and guided our reflections.
Rather than offering definitive conclusions, these works are intended as contributions to an ongoing conversation. They mirror the questions, tensions, and perspectives that accompanied our studies, while leaving space for new interpretations to unfold. Our hope is that they may serve as stepping stones, encouraging fresh lines of inquiry and alternative ways of seeing.

Beatrice, Eleonora, and Emma

In my work as a professor, my goal is to spark curiosity and passion in the students I interact with. For me, the social sciences have a dual function: to produce robust descriptions of complex phenomena like poverty, injustice, social conflict, and social change – often with the intent of informing public policy and decision-makers – and to develop empirically grounded theoretical models.
In this book, these two dimensions come together in a generative way. In the texts by the three students, whose theses I had the privilege of supervising, you can see their passion, curiosity, and commitment to a topic that affects an entire urban population. These feelings, however, are combined with their first attempt, through their theses, to bring scientific rigor to the application of their values. For these reasons, I am grateful for the opportunity for discussion they have offered me.

Maurizio

1 Venice: Trapped Between Dream and Nightmare

Maurizio Busacca
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Summary 1.1 Introduction. – 1.2 How Are You, Venice? – 1.3 Venezia in the Works: The Economic and Productive Foundations of the City. – 1.4 Present and Future Implications.

To Edoardo and Maddalena,
that their future may be rich
in opportunities and values.

1.1 Introduction

In recent years, anyone who has grappled with Venice and its problems – and there have been many of both – has had to confront the city's unique morphology (Rubini 2016), the experience it provides (Scarpa 2000), depopulation (Somma 2024), overtourism (Visentin, Bertocchi 2019), the imagery it creates (Borelli, Busacca 2020), and the risks that accompany it (Settis 2014).

None of these issues are trivial or easy to solve. They are all what are known as wicked problems (Termeer et al. 2019) – problems with high levels of complexity that are deeply interconnected with each other and influenced by numerous factors. If this were not the case, we could not explain why Venice's problems have been debated for over 60 years (Cini Foundation 1964), or why themes relevant today were even mentioned in the mid-nineteenth century (Ruskin 2025). After

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all, Venice is a special city, and its uniqueness is even established by law n. 171/ 1973[1] and law n. 798/1984.[2] However, this status does not protect it from the common problems that every city faces.

Settis (2014) reminds us that cities die for three reasons: under attack by an enemy, when an enemy conquers and imposes its rule, and when they lose their memory. Venice has experienced all three of these forms of death. It seems to me, though, that people today do not realize that these forces are now acting against the city together, exerting pressure in a different way than in the past.

Today, there is no Austrian army bombing Venice as they did in 1849 or during the First World War. Yet, what remains on the streets at night after more than 100,000 people have visited the city in a single day looks very much like the aftermath of a battle, including the wounded staggering dazed and leaning against the walls of a narrow *calle*. Similarly, no enemy is occupying the city as Napoleon's troops did in 1797, which marked the end of the thousand-year-old Republic of Venice. However, new users of the city – commuters, students, tourists, and day-trippers – have eroded the space available to the Venetian civitas.

Venice, along with the few remaining Venetians living in the historic city, has not lost its memory but has instead turned it into a fetish to be celebrated uncritically. The city and its Venetian identity are glorified as if they were inherently positive values, ignoring the fierce classism that characterizes both.

However, Venice is also at risk of dying for another reason not mentioned by Settis: nature. As Nobel Prize for Water Andrea Rinaldo reminds us, if we do not do something to stop it, the water will submerge Venice in about 50 to 70 years.[3] It would seem, then, that Venice is dying.

But that is not the case. The central argument of this book is that Venice is not dying but rather going through a crisis, and there are visible signs of a potential rebirth. These signs are evident in three key contexts: economic, social, and physical.

The tourism industry has a power and pervasiveness that could seemingly suffocate all other city economies. Yet, these other economies have the qualities needed to carve out their own space, especially if they are supported by policies and governance focused on economic diversification.

1 Legge del 16 maggio 1973, n. 171. Interventi per la salvaguardia di Venezia.

2 Legge del 29 novembre 1984, n. 798. Nuovi interventi per la salvaguardia di Venezia.

3 Here, an interview with Andrea Rinaldo, recipient of the prestigious Nobel Prize for Water and member of the FAI board of directors `https://uk.fai-international.org/news/andrea-rinaldo-venice-has-no-more-time-to-lose/`.

The social issues should perhaps be examined separately for the two parts of the city: the historic islands and the mainland. In the former, it may no longer be accurate to speak of 50,000 residents; instead, we should start discussing a population of over 100,000 people comprised of residents, students, and workers who live in the city every day and require different goods and services from those of tourists. On the mainland, we need to address the city's demographic transformation, with a continuously growing presence of foreign-born citizens and an aging native population that tends to migrate beyond the city limits.

Finally, on a physical level, the tripolar structure on which the city was built throughout the 20th century – the Lido for tourism, the historic islands for culture, and the mainland for industry – is no longer sustainable in the face of global changes and needs to be completely rethought.

To understand the city and its transformations, it is essential to delve into these three dimensions and assess the city's overall health.

1.2 How Are You, Venice?

This question stems from a widespread perception of the city as being in crisis, transition, or transformation – terms often used interchangeably to suggest that Venice needs a fundamental rethinking and the development of new capacities to face its main challenges, from managing tourism and depopulation to addressing socio-demographic changes.

The answer, however, draws on the findings from nearly two years of collaborative work as part of the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* (Rethinking Venice) project.[4] It's an attempt to synthesize what was produced by a collective intelligence comprising academics, associations, civic movements, professional organizations, and active citizens.

Like any summary, it can never be entirely comprehensive; the gaps will be more numerous than the insights. However, the sheer amount of useful and usable knowledge generated during this process is immense, offering a truly rich and diverse snapshot of the situation.

Let's start at the end. Venice is not in perfect health, but it is not doing so badly, and more importantly, it is possible to act concretely and with a few key moves reactivate the urban dynamism the city needs to face the future with optimism and confidence. In this work, we have chosen to adopt a specific a priori position, one that rejects the common metaphor of cities as living organisms that can, like living things, change or even die. Instead, we view the city as a

4 Here the website containing all the materials produced during the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* project: `https://www.ripensarevenezia.it`.

social product resulting from the interplay between the mode of production – a concept Karl Marx or David Harvey might use – and the social structure that forms its foundation – a view Mark Granovetter might take. Therefore, rather than 'dying,' cities tend to change their state, unless faced with truly exceptional circumstances, such as those described by Settis and mentioned earlier in this volume.

Within the city lies a great potential of energy, ideas, and other resources – a valuable asset to begin Venice's transformation and give it the right momentum to look ahead. Since the early 2000s, there have been ongoing attempts to build a large metropolitan area with Padua and Treviso. Together, these three cities would form a single, highly interconnected functional area, capable of offering businesses and citizens an urban scale suitable for international competition. This idea was first discussed in the 1980s and was tried again about 20 years ago (Busetto 2014), but now is the right time to recognize that the urban scale global cities are looking toward is a regional one. Milan has done it, followed by the Bologna-Florence area. Why shouldn't the Northeast do the same?

Furthermore, even while hit by depopulation in the historic center and demographic changes on the mainland, Venice still has great strength from its resident population and its ability to attract a significant number (over 150,000 according to recent data) of non-tourist users – commuters who travel daily from other cities to Mestre and Venice for study, work, or leisure. Venice attracts more than just tourists.

Finally, the wind of necessity is pushing Venice forward. As Andrea Rinaldo reminded us, in about 70 to 100 years, Venice will die because the MOSE system will no longer be enough to save it from rising tides Thus, it is not a matter of if or when: action must be taken now.

It is true that Venice has many problems, but by intervening quickly, it can not only be saved but also put back in shape. Now, we will review the main themes that emerged during the two years of work on the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* project. These reflections will provide a foundation of knowledge about the city to put the reader in the best position to understand the three essays that complete this volume, which offer original viewpoints on the urban transformations underway. Specifically: Eleonora Girotti's essay proposes interpreting the transformations presented here based on Nancy Fraser's idea of Cannibal Capitalism; Beatrice Gervasi's contribution, using an original urban research method, shows how the presence of social infrastructure acts as a dam against the proliferation of tourism; Finally, Emma Maria Rossi's work tells the story of social entrepreneurship in a tourist city, presenting it as a market with autonomous potential distinct from the tourism economy.

The topic that took up the most space, in terms of both reports and insights, was tourism, described as both a resource and a

problem. Tourism has monopolized the local economy, creating negative consequences for society and the city's overall wealth. The tourism supply chain is made up of businesses in low-value-added sectors where competition on labor costs is at its peak, leading to the spread of poorly paid and under-protected jobs. This situation, in turn, encourages increasingly sharp forms of social and spatial segregation, with entire neighbourhoods inhabited by foreign-born residents who occupy the lowest positions in the local value chain. At the same time, however, tourism is currently the city's leading economy. Without it, Venice would have a very limited job market. As such, tourism is a resource to be protected and enhanced.

However, the effects of tourism are not just economic. When you walk through the historic center of Venice, you find yourself in a perpetual queue: waiting in the narrowest *calli*, to enter the docks, at the supermarket checkout, and on the smallest bridges. Waiting in line forces us to slow down, which lets us pay attention to what people near us are saying. In Venice's case, this is made complicated by the variety of languages we hear at every turn. Tourism is now omnipresent, both spatially (no part of the city is excluded from tourist flows) and temporally (what was historically the low season in winter now sees only a slight drop in tourist pressure).

At night, though, the city seems to empty out. Day-trippers return to their home cities, and tourists go back to their hotels. The residents are few and their numbers are constantly decreasing. The explosion of tourism has completely reshaped the city, not only by re-functionalizing most of its economic activities but also by distorting its civitas. Today, Venetians are not just few in number, they are also profoundly different: in addition to the locals, who we must remember still exist in a significant quantity, a growing number of inhabitants come from the most disparate parts of the world. They have different skin colors and features, work in jobs that connect them with the rest of the world, have medium-to-high levels of education and income, and work in various positions within the tourism, culture, or related and complementary sectors. This diversity is a form of wealth. Today, the size of the population, along with the characteristics of the physical space, encourages daily interaction. You can see it by listening to the large number of people greeting each other on the street or counting the number of active associations in a small patch of land and lagoon – by some estimates, more than 100. This was and remains one of the great values of the historic center: the ability to build relationships in public more easily than in cities where people get around by car or other motorized vehicles. In Venice, you get to know people with your feet. Therefore, Venice today resembles a small global village more than ever. It is as small as a village, yet it consistently attracts new residents from every corner of the world and engages daily with thousands of equally global tourists. However, this part of the city, after spending the

last 50 years caring for its physical infrastructure – cleaning stones, digging out canals and the lagoon, and restoring facades – thanks to a national law that recognizes Venice's special status, is now waking up more and more uncertain, worried about its future, and angry about the inability to govern tourism. This is happening despite a legislative framework, particularly the 2022 Pellicani amendment, which gives the City of Venice the power to regulate tourist rentals. The lack of courage or, worse, the desire not to upset the interests of some has led the municipal administration to prefer an ineffective experimentation that cannot curb a phenomenon exerting intense pressure on the city. In addition to not discussing the regulation of short-term rentals, there is also no discussion about equalizing the negative consequences of tourism. The wealth generated by tourism, which is evident in positive municipal budget balances derived mainly from tourist taxes and other revenue from the sector (primarily ACTV), could be used to support new urban economies, revitalize housing, strengthen preservation efforts, enhance social services, and address security issues. Instead, it is left to produce a budget surplus with a generalized destination, not one specifically targeted to repay citizens for the damage caused by tourism.

In analyzing the problem, it becomes possible to glimpse a solution: transforming tourism into an opportunity to rebalance opportunities for well-being among the population, by redirecting the resources generated there toward interventions that can benefit the citizens most affected by its consequences. Some issues, like this one, are not only practical but also ethical, and the pursuit of greater social justice is one of them. This must motivate the courage to act, even at the risk of displeasing some.

Now, let us cross the bridge and land in Mestre, a part of the city that has undergone a deep and less-publicized transformation than Venice. Just a walk through the streets of the city center on a weekday afternoon reveals a dramatic decline. Closed storefronts and 'for rent' or 'for sale' signs are visible even on the most prestigious streets, right into the city's main square. The urban economy is in a deep crisis, first triggered by an excessive number of large shopping centers outside the city and later worsened by the flight of many residents from the center to the suburbs. This exodus has left voids – both in terms of commercial activities and residential units – that have been quickly filled by new residents, criminal phenomena, and a sense of insecurity. The simultaneous arrival of these new groups has led to the association of the two events, creating the 'immigration-crime' pairing. In reality, the two phenomena are independent and generate different, though complex and in some cases negative, effects. This association must therefore be dismantled and exposed as a rhetorical device used to gain easy consensus. Crime is a product of inactivity, both socially and politically. Making the city more lively, frequented,

well-lit, and patrolled is a fundamental ingredient in any process that aims to address the problem of insecurity. Between the late 1980s and the early 2000s, Venice had been able to invent a completely original way to deal with the security problem, based on street work and the ability to coordinate repression and prevention. Teams of street educators worked in the neighborhoods, intercepting criminal activities, which they reported to the competent authorities. At the same time, they engaged in dialogue to reduce the impact of these issues on the area and its citizens. Aware that criminal activities hit hardest where social distress is widespread, that method knew exactly where to act. Insecurity disproportionately affects poorer social classes, who lack the economic means to protect themselves and whose property loses value. The wealthy have always had the resources and ability to shield themselves from insecurity. Therefore, security is an issue of social justice before it is one of public order. Civic movements like *Riprendiamoci la città* (Let's Take Back the City) and initiatives such as *Le cene di quartiere* (neighborhood dinners) are examples to be followed and supported. However, a grassroots response also needs an institutional one – from above – with capable institutions that are ready to intervene. The coordination among the members of the security committee should be strengthened, avoiding the media posturing of some individuals, which only serves to rigidify the actions of others. The revival of social policies based on street work and dialogue with local communities represents the third leg of the effort needed to address the issue of insecurity. This phenomenon, however, is not only caused by crime but also, to a large extent, by the crisis of urban economies. Closed shop windows, workshops, and bars create shadowy areas that increase citizens' perception of insecurity. Lighting those spaces again and attracting new visitors, thus increasing the presence of people in the city center, would mean restoring a sense of security and triggering a virtuous cycle among citizenship, urban economies, and safety.

Why would young people want to live in a city with these characteristics? In fact, they prefer to migrate elsewhere, both within and outside the region. This phenomenon, however, further impoverishes the city, because young people are a social group that, more than others, lives in the city and stimulates the local economy, both as workers and consumers. However, a very poor job market and a widespread sense of insecurity tend to drive away many who do not aspire to make a living from tourism. The real estate market does not help either, due to both the quality and quantity of available properties, which do not meet the needs of potential young residents. During one of the many workshops we held, we learned that to visually measure a city's real estate economy, you should count the number of cranes. In Mestre, you count very few, just a handful, a sign of a stagnant economy. New houses are not being built, and old ones

are not being renovated because the market is static, and no one has ever thought of initiating large-scale urban regeneration processes.

Urban regeneration does not just mean building a new high-rise, a park, and putting up some lights. Regeneration means profoundly redesigning a part of the city by planning new urban functions and creating new living environments. This is certainly difficult in a context where small and fragmented property ownership is prevalent – a right that is in itself inviolable. However, it is possible to build winning public-private partnerships, where the latter invests with economic objectives, and the former balances the scales by requesting investments in collective social infrastructure in return, such as green areas, shared spaces, sports facilities, commercial activities, and community building. The economic spinoff of such operations could give rise to new urban economies and make the city attractive to new residents, which is more necessary than ever given that the demographic balance of the Municipality of Venice is negative despite the large influx of foreign citizens. These operations could also be used to combat the phenomena of spatial segregation that were humorously represented by a map that circulated online a few years ago. It described Mestre's neighborhoods based on the main ethnic characteristics of their residents: Bissuola inhabited mainly by citizens of Russian, Ukrainian, and Moldovan origin; Altobello now known as 'Little Dhaka'; the 'Chinatown of Via Piave'; and 'African Marghera.'

This phenomenon, left to run its course without any attempt at governance, has had its effects on the poorest and most vulnerable citizens, such as the elderly. For them, these new forms of coexistence erode economic and social resources, setting the stage for an ethnic-based social conflict that risks becoming increasingly heated at any moment. A problem could thus become an opportunity, based on a strategy already tested in many international cities, from Milan to Barcelona: urban regeneration as a comprehensive strategy for economic, social, and cultural development. The centrality of the security issue and the promotion of new urban economies in Mestre, as well as the governance of tourism and the redirection of resources for equalization purposes in Venice, are ideas made possible by the social vitality and the presence of local economies that could, in their nascent form, challenge the monopoly of the tourism economy.

The rate of civic participation is very high, in both Venice and Mestre. In addition to the aforementioned committees that work on the idea of living the city as a way to counter crime and insecurity, cultural and sports associations and solidarity volunteering are widely present and active. The neighborhood concierge services, climate shelters, and sports clubs are some of the most visible and concrete examples of this. Many of these have made a fundamental contribution to *Rethinking Venice*, demonstrating analytical and

reflective capacity as well as a capacity for action. For this reason, they deserve to be given greater consideration and involved in the city's governance processes, not just treated as recipients of grants or users of spaces made available by local institutions. Their knowledge of the city – from its people to its problems – is a fundamental resource for designing concrete solutions that are relevant to the issues, rather than those crafted in an office by technical experts.

While not yet a fully organized sector, the cultural industry has now reached significant volumes. This is thanks to the work of both large and small cultural institutions, and the professional efforts of a growing number of workers in the field who are organizing into small businesses or cooperatives. The music, songwriting, theatre, dance, artistic, and general creative work scenes now represent an important occupational sector. This is evidenced by the increasing number of cultural and collaborative spaces – like coworking and fab labs – that are emerging in the city and finding growing success, as seen at the M9 museum, the Hybrid Tower, or on Via Rosa. Connecting this sector to the larger chain of international events and the film industry, which is growing rapidly in the Veneto region, could be a unique opportunity for the city. Venice would become a producer as well as an exhibitor of cultural products, tapping into higher-value-added parts of the industry and increasing its international appeal, especially in regenerated areas of the mainland. This idea is so powerful that it has prompted some to propose the cultural sector as the new occupant of the old industrial zone, which is often presented as being in crisis. However, thanks to the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* project, we have learned that the Marghera and Port area are less disused than it appears when you drive past it. The number of businesses and employees in the area, along with the commercial value of the land and properties, reveals a more dynamic productive space than expected. Hypotheses for the establishment of parts of the hydrogen and space industries are attracting increasing interest. However, in this case as well, without a strategy and a way to govern this phenomenon, these possibilities are short-lived. They run up against the absence of collective goods for competitiveness, which is the set of tangible and intangible infrastructures – including public and common areas and the relationship with universities, research centers, and the credit system – that businesses consider fundamental when deciding to invest in one place over another.

Finally, we come to the last topic, which is not the least important, but rather the one that encompasses all others. Without addressing it, there is no point in talking about Venice's future: safeguarding. We have already been reminded by Rinaldo that we have between 70 and 100 years to deal with a sea-level rise of about 100 cm. The money and political battles spent on the MOSE will be rendered completely useless by the effects of climate change. Without the

ability to act, Venice will literally die by submersion. The climate issue has two sides: on one hand, we need to act today to counteract long-term effects; on the other, we need to act today to deal with the immediate effects on the population. Rising temperatures cause physical discomfort but also an increase in current expenses for cooling, which disproportionately affects the poorest citizens who, on average, live in less energy-efficient homes. With the exception of a few initiatives, such as the creation of climate shelters, this issue has so far been left in the hands of private citizens, resulting in increased inequality. In the city, there is no discussion of either energy communities or the creation of favourable climate islands – all interventions that would require a strong public-private partnership.

Citizens, therefore, describe themselves as worried, angry, and tired of a city they see as increasingly degraded and emptied out. At the same time, they show they are ready for action and willing to participate in planning, decision-making, and taking action. This approach can be interpreted as a growing desire for good politics – one that combines the specific interests of homogeneous groups of citizens with the collective interest of a city, which is, by its nature, heterogeneous. It represents an excellent starting point for any desire for urban transformation.

1.3 Venezia in the Works: The Economic and Productive Foundations of the City

To support the assertions made so far, this essay now presents, even though in brief, the results of research conducted over the past seven years. We will begin by surveying the main economic sectors before offering some general reflections in an attempt to answer the question posed at the beginning of this essay: "How are you, Venice?".

1.3.1 The Hegemony of the Tourist Sector

The tourism sector in Venice is a complex and layered phenomenon, simultaneously fundamental to the local economy while also generating profound and complicated social and environmental implications (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024).

Analyzing specific data for Venice reveals significant and constant pressure from tourism. As early as 2009, the city recorded an average of nearly 60,000 visitors per day, with an annual peak exceeding 30 million tourists overnight stays in 2011. More recently, on some days in 2023, Venice saw over 100,000 daily tourist visitors, a figure that highlights the intensity and continued growth of this phenomenon. This massive presence often translates into a 'hit-and-run' tourism

model, where visitors, despite contributing to overcrowding, stay for very short periods, limiting the economic benefits while creating significant disruption for the local community.

From an employment standpoint, the tourism sector represents an economic pillar at both the local and regional levels. In 2022, activities directly related to tourism employed approximately 257,000 people in Veneto. Specifically for Venice, 2023 saw about 24,500 new hires, and tourism was confirmed as the main driver of labor demand in the province, accounting for roughly one-third of planned hires.[5] However, despite these significant numbers, the sector faces increasing difficulty in finding staff, particularly in the restaurant industry, where more than half of the needed professional roles are hard to fill.

In parallel, the supply of tourist beds in Venice has undergone a radical transformation.[6] Recent data from Inside Airbnb,[7] Municipality of Venice,[8] and Yearbook of Tourism,[9] updated as of early 2025, shows that Venice's historic center (including Venice, Murano, and Burano) has a number of tourist beds (over 60,000) that exceeds its resident population (fewer than 57,000). A significant percentage, approximately 64%, of these beds are in non-hotel accommodations, such as tourist rentals and B&Bs, a phenomenon that has grown rapidly since the early 2000s. The historic center, despite being home to just one-fifth of the municipal population, accounts for over 60% of the tourist accommodation supply. However, this trend is also growing rapidly in mainland areas closer to the historic center.

These developments have created a series of complex problems. Overtourism and the proliferation of short-term rentals have accelerated gentrification and depopulation, drastically reducing the availability of housing and other essential services for residents, contributing to their exodus. Over the last two decades, Venice has lost an additional 20,000 inhabitants. The city, already fragile, is

5 Here, the Regional Labour Market Observatory of Veneto Lavoro presents the results of a study on labour supply and demand in the tourism sector in Veneto https://www.venetolavoro.it/documents/10180/1693590/Misure_118_Settore+turistico.pdf/02cba477-9fb5-8386-54ca-8f199d651ddd?t=1692951869068.

6 Here, the Italia Nostra Association - Venice presents a report on the evolution of hotels and accommodation facilities in Venice https://www.italianostravenezia.org/statistiche-su-venezia/alberghi-e-strutture-extra-alberghiere-nel-corso-degli-anni/.

7 Inside Airbnb is a mission driven project that provides data and advocacy about Airbnb's impact on residential communities https://insideairbnb.com/.

8 https://geoportale.comune.venezia.it/Html5Viewer/index.html?viewer=IDS.IDS&LOCALE=IT-it.

9 Here, every year, the Municipality of Venice publishes the Tourism Yearbooks in an open version https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/studi.

subject to unsustainable logistical and structural pressure, hosting a number of visitors that far exceeds its capacity, causing congestion and compromising the daily quality of life for its residents. This has led to a progressive deterioration of the cultural heritage and a worsening of the tourist experience itself, in addition to serious risks to environmental sustainability (Giupponi 2022). Recent measures, such as the introduction of an access fee for day visitors, represent an attempt to manage the flow of tourists, but the challenge for Venice remains how to balance the economic benefits of tourism with the preservation of its social and cultural identity, preventing it from transforming from a liveable city into a mere place of passage.

1.3.2 Craftsmanship and Commerce: Between Tradition and Touristification

Venice's economic fabric, traditionally anchored in a rich heritage of craftsmanship and a varied commercial landscape (Busacca, Paladini 2022; Busacca et al. 2025), is undergoing profound transformations, largely influenced by the growing pressure of mass tourism. An analysis of available data reveals a complex dynamic, characterized by a progressive shift in the commercial and artisanal landscape of the historical center (Paladini 2024a).

The number of artisan businesses in Venice – and more generally in the Veneto region – shows a declining trend. At the regional level, artisan businesses decreased by 0.4% in the third quarter of 2023, and although Venice ranks third in the Veneto region for the number of artisan businesses (with nearly 15,000 units), the sector is struggling to maintain its strength and is declining faster than in the rest of the region. This decline is not uniform and depends on the specific trades. For example, there isa reduction in traditional manufacturing activities, while niche trades related to artistic and traditional craftsmanship, restoration, and cultural heritage preservation are showing more resilience.

A deeper analysis of commerce reveals a clear touristification of businesses. Venice's historic center has seen a progressive replacement of local neighbourhood shops and traditional commercial establishments with businesses oriented almost exclusively toward tourism. This trend is documented by studies that show the density of tourist-focused businesses (like takeaway food and souvenir shops) has increased exponentially (Studio Sintesi 2018), at the expense of historic workshops and essential services for residents. Between 2009 and 2017, the number of businesses serving residents in the historic center decreased by 32.8%, while those serving tourists increased by 22.2%. This transformation is particularly evident in some areas of the historic city, where the number of tourist-oriented

businesses has grown significantly, changing the very character of the neighbourhoods.

Artisan and commercial businesses in Venice face several challenges. Complex logistics, a lack of adequate space for artisanal production, high rental costs, and difficulty in finding specialized labour are among the main obstacles (Paladini 2024b; Bertocchi, Visentin 2019). Real estate pressure, fueled by tourist demand and the conversion of commercial spaces into accommodations or souvenir shops, makes it difficult for small, traditional workshops to stay in business. This contributes to the progressive depopulation of the historic center, as the decrease in essential services and the loss of commercial identity make living in the city less appealing.

The transformation of the commercial fabric also impacts employment. While the influx of tourists generates jobs in the sale of souvenirs and fast-food products, it simultaneously endangers traditional artisan trades that require specific skills and are often passed down from generation to generation.

1.3.3 The Decline of the Estuary

The Lido of Venice, once a renowned seaside resort that attracted European aristocracy and international high society, has seen a progressive contraction in its beach tourism. This trend stands in stark contrast to the vigorous growth of neighbouring coastlines like Jesolo and Cavallino-Treporti. This dichotomy highlights a shift in tourist preferences and the different adaptive capacities of these destinations.

In parallel with the decline of traditional beach tourism, the Lido has attempted to reposition itself by increasingly focusing on culture-based economic activities. The most famous of these is undoubtedly the Venice International Film Festival. This globally renowned event generates significant economic and media activity, attracting industry professionals, celebrities, and an international audience for a limited period each year. Other cultural and conference initiatives have developed over time, seeking to capitalize on the Lido's fame and its proximity to Venice.

However, these activities, despite their prestige, have not been enough to fill the economic and employment void left by the decline of beach tourism (Cusmai 2021). The economic benefits of the Film Festival, while significant during its run, are limited and do not guarantee a continuous flow of tourists or year-round demand. Cultural events create a different type of economic and employment impact from traditional beach tourism, which is often more widespread and locally integrated (e.g., managing beach resorts, widespread seasonal restaurants, and related services). Outside of the Film Festival period, the Lido's commercial and hospitality

sectors struggle to recover. The general perception among local business owners is that cultural events, while prestigious, cannot replace the economic volume and stability that once came from a prosperous beach season. The decline of its beach resort identity has led to a decrease in the Lido's commercial and social vitality outside of specific events, highlighting the need for more integrated and diversified development strategies for its revival.

1.3.4 The Mainland Economy: The Port and Airport as Strategic Resources

The Venetian mainland, with the port system of Venice and Porto Marghera, is a key economic and employment driver for the region.[10] Today, the Porto Marghera area is a consolidated industrial and logistics district, home to approximately 1,000 companies that provide direct employment for about 11,000 workers. These jobs are distributed across industry (38%), logistics and transportation (20%), the service sector (22%), and commerce/other sectors (20%). This production base has shown remarkable resilience, with over half of the businesses continuing to operate without interruption even during the pandemic.

The port's future is set for further growth thanks to significant investments and strategic projects. The construction of the new container platform, on a 90-hectare site once occupied by Montefibre, involves a total investment of 189 million euros. Work began in April 2024 to move the riverbank and build a new dock. In addition, a Simplified Logistics Zone, centered around the Port of Venice and the Rodigino area, was established in October 2022. This initiative is expected to attract about 1.4 billion euros in investments and create over 4,200 direct new jobs, with an additional 6,300 indirect jobs. This is also supported by 80 million euros in government funding made available in September 2024. These developments are part of a broader vision that includes creating new commercial, logistics, and energy terminals and building a new multi-modal corridor (road and rail) to effectively connect the terminals to the trans-European network, improving transport capacity and reducing impact on more urbanized areas.

However, these positive dynamics coexist with challenges in the local labor market. The province of Venice is experiencing increasing difficulty for businesses in finding qualified and unqualified staff, with a difficulty rate reaching 52% in 2025. This is mainly due to a lack of

10 Here, the Re-think Venice project presents the materials from a workshop `https://www.ripensarevenezia.it/il-laboratorio-seconda-giornata/`.

candidates (32%) and inadequate skills (12%). This scenario highlights the need for targeted policies to increase female employment and to manage migration rationally, including training programs to integrate people into the workforce and meet employment needs. The current growth model has led to a significant increase in the foreign population (a 498% rise between 2002 and 2022, representing 16% of the total provincial population), particularly concentrated in Mestre Centro and Marghera. Here, more than one in four residents is a foreigner, often employed in low-skilled and low-wage sectors such as tourism and industry (e.g., Fincantieri), which creates a risk of zoning in some urban areas and potential social imbalances. To avoid such trends and support equitable and inclusive growth, it is imperative to diversify the mainland's economic base, promoting higher value-added sectors and strengthening collaboration between academia and the business community. The Venice airport represents the infrastructure that has grown the most in recent decades, leading its owner to present a new Master Plan in 2023 (Aeroporto di Venezia 2023). The airport is managed by SAVE, a company that heads the Northeast Airport Hub, which includes the airports of Venice, Treviso, Verona, and Brescia. In 2024, the Northeast Airport Hub as a whole handled about 18.4 million passengers, an increase of 3.1% over 2023. The airport system's impact on the area is multi-faceted and contributes significantly to the development of the local and regional economy. The data is notable and is included in the Sustainability Report that the company has been producing and certifying since 2014. According to the latest available data, the Northeast airport system generates employment for over 30,000 workers, both direct and indirect, and contributed about 1.6 billion euros to the area's GDP, despite the impact of the pandemic. The Master Plan's traffic projections for Marco Polo Airport predict 20.8 million passengers by 2037. The new Master Plan's interventions are therefore designed to accommodate these growth forecasts, considering that without the new works, the airport would reach its saturation level of 12.5 million passengers as early as 2026. This means approximately 8 million new passengers in about 10 years. Potentially, this would widen the entry point to Venice for tourist flows, which numerous international sources predict will grow rapidly in the coming years, especially due to an increase in travellers from emerging economies.

1.4 Present and Future Implications

An analysis of Venice's economic and productive health reveals a still-vital economic base, but it also highlights a growing and worrying over-reliance on the tourism sector. This dependency has significant consequences for the city's social structure and future prospects.

While tourism is a crucial economic pillar – as shown by the number of daily visitors and the fact that it drove about one-third of planned hires in the province in 2023 – its dominance is disproportionately absorbing economic, political, and administrative resources.

Media and policy attention tends to focus on managing tourism, often neglecting other areas. This is evident in the emphasis on tracking and containment measures for tourist numbers – with questionable results – while overlooking policies related to healthcare, housing, and local services. Such policies could create a more favorable environment for residents and help diversify the urban economy.

The continuous growth of tourist beds, which by early 2025 had surpassed the number of residents in the historic center (over 60,000 vs. fewer than 57,000), and the proliferation of non-hotel accommodations like tourist rentals and B&Bs (64% of the total supply), suggest that time and money are increasingly being allocated toward tourism. This risks to come at the expense of other strategic sectors and, moreover, fueling precarious, low-wage, and poorly protected employment.

This excessive dependence is also evident in the touristification of the historic center's commercial and artisanal fabric. Over the last 20 years, businesses catering to residents have decreased by 32.8%, while those catering to tourists have increased by 22.2%, resulting in a net negative change of over 11%. This transformation not only alters the city's identity but also contributes to gentrification and depopulation. Venice has lost an additional 20,000 inhabitants in the last two decades, starting from an already critical situation. The unsustainable logistical and structural pressure from a number of visitors that far exceeds the city's capacity compromises the daily quality of life for residents and leads to the deterioration of cultural heritage.

Furthermore, the characteristics of the local economy, heavily focused on tourism and related low-skilled services, have profound repercussions on the social fabric, creating new challenges for co-existence. The difficulty in finding qualified personnel in the tourism sector, particularly in restaurants, where more than half of the professional roles are hard to fill, highlights an imbalance in the labor market. This is often characterized by seasonal, low-wage jobs with limited protections. This scenario is also linked to the significant increase in the foreign population (+498% in the province between 2002 and 2022, reaching 16% of the total). This population is concentrated in areas like Mestre Centro and Marghera and is often employed in low-skilled sectors like tourism and industrial support activities. This dynamic fuels a risk of zoning and potential social imbalances, putting a strain on the city, whose welfare system has not yet adapted to these changes.

Finally, the limited economic diversification and the prevalence of low-value-added sectors tend to drive more educated young people

away from the city. Despite the Venetian mainland, with its port system, serving as a significant economic and employment engine with about 1,000 companies and 11,000 direct employees – and despite future investments in the new container platform and Simplified Logistics Zone expected to create over 4,200 new direct jobs and 6,300 indirect ones – the province of Venice is having increasing difficulty finding both qualified and unqualified staff, with a difficulty rate reaching 52% in 2025. The Municipality of Venice also has a negative and declining resident balance, a sign of a slow but progressive depopulation that is not fully offset by the arrival of foreign citizens. This difficulty is not due to a lack of available jobs but rather to a mismatch between supply and demand. The scarcity of professional opportunities and careers in high-value-added sectors, coupled with the dominance of tourism-related jobs and low-skilled services, discourages qualified young people from staying or returning to the city. This contributes to a loss of local human capital, innovation, and economic dynamism.

The city resembles a patient with a difficult-to-cure disease, but one who also has the qualities and resources to recover if properly cared for. You will find some of these qualities in the texts that follow and that complete this book.

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2 Cannibal Venice: Analysis of the Water City in the Anthropocene

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Summary 2.1 Introduction. – 2.2 Nancy Fraser's Cannibal Capitalism. – 2.3 The City of Venice and the Ways in Which it Cannibalizes Itself. – 2.4 Re-thinking Venice to Rethink the Paradigm. – 2.5 Final Remarks.

2.1 Introduction

We live in an era of increasingly convergent crises. Ecological collapse, democratic erosion, deteriorating care networks and rampant inequality are too severe to be addressed as separate emergencies and they represent parallel symptoms of a deeper structural disorder. The theoretical framework of Nancy Fraser's Cannibal Capitalism (2023) offers a powerful lens to interpret the overall picture: capitalism is not a mere economic system, as it is widely defined, but rather a form of society that feeds off the very conditions that make it possible in the first place, undermining its own prerogatives of possibility in the long run.

This essay arises from a central question: in what ways does cannibal capitalism manifest in a concrete urban context; and are there powerful sites of resistance within it that hold potential for radical change? To explore such questions, the city of Venice serves as a paradigmatic case study. With its historical exemplary management

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of land and water, its dependence on the tourism industry, its seemingly unstoppable demographic collapse and the fragility of its threatened ecosystem, the Water City incarnates in a dramatic and intensified form the boundary struggles described by Fraser.

Through an interdisciplinary methodology that combines political critical theory, urban studies and social analysis, the first two chapters apply Fraser's framework to the Venetian context, interpreting phenomena such as overtourism, environmental degradation, social reproduction crisis and the hollowing out of democratic institutions as expressions of the capitalist system's intrinsic contradictions. Finally, the third chapter introduces the project of *Ri-Pensare Venezia*, interpreted as a holistic attempt to resist the city's commodification and at the same time to reclaim it as a living, inhabitable space.

Therefore, to re-read the city of Venice through the cannibal capitalism's paradigm means not only to expose the structural violence and inefficiency of neoliberal capitalism, but also to identify possible counter-hegemonic, bottom-up responses.

2.2 Nancy Fraser's Cannibal Capitalism

Anyone would agree on the fact that today we are going through an unprecedented period of crisis, which does not only encompass the realms of politics, economy, ecology, or society, but compounds them all together. Periods of instability have existed throughout the whole development of human history, but today's era of turmoil has a peculiarity of its own: it concerns the entire social order, as calamities of various kinds converge, intersecting and exacerbating one another.

From a Western perspective, although not exclusively, the present is marked by economic stagnation, together with increasing inflation – phenomenon referred to as stagflation – fueled and at the same time exacerbated by growing inequality and spreading precariat. These dynamics, combined with the erosion of public welfare systems, outcome of the neoliberal assault towards social reproduction, are leading to a spiraling detriment of living standards for the vast majority. At the same time, the current ecological collapse is generating a cascade of consequences around the world, among which famines, environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity, escalation of extreme weather events, health crises and forced mass migration. This complex scenario is further aggravated by the proliferation of armed conflicts, systemic dispossessions, genocides and the rise of racism, ideological extremism, neo-nationalism, xenophobia, and political polarization. Despite the different nature of these struggles, they seem to share one common root cause: Capitalism.

Capitalism is commonly defined as an economic system based on free waged labor, private property of the means of production, market exchange and profit accumulation. However, many scholars, among which the critical theorist Nancy Fraser, consider it too narrow of a definition. In one of her most recent works, Cannibal Capitalism (2023), she investigates a much expanded definition, describing it as a type of society in which economic factors and activities are flanked and supported by other non-economized ones such as social reproduction, exploitation of nature, political power and wealth expropriation from the Global South. These dimensions are vital background conditions for the functioning and the very existence of the capitalist economy, yet they are systematically neglected and devalued within its dominant discourse. Doing so, capitalism undermines the very conditions that make its reproduction possible, in Fraser's words "like the ouroboros, it eats its own tail" (Fraser 2023, xv).

Each sphere is currently undergoing its own individual crisis: social reproduction is experiencing a crisis of care rooted primarily on gender inequality; politics is marked by a general crisis of democracy, fueled by the widespread rise of populism and extremism; the global environment is under severe threat from climate change; and the exploitative nature of financial capitalism is exacerbating inequality worldwide. These seemingly distinct crises are all grounded in hierarchical dualisms – center/periphery, production/reproduction, human/non-human, private/public – that reflect deeper power dynamics inherent to capitalism, which structurally find its expression through various forms of domination, often sustained by cultural hegemonization processes that reproduce these dichotomies. Each dualism perceives the periphery, the non-human, the public realm, and care work as occupying subaltern positions compared to their counterparts, misleadingly considered as more 'productive' and therefore more valuable (Fraser 2023). Analyzing the ways in which these dualisms generate inherent contradictions, and at the same time intersect and reinforce one another, allows for a deeper understanding of the nature of capitalism, hopefully paving the way for the identification of potential points for transformative intervention.

Fraser's analysis collects in a single picture various kinds of oppressions and struggles such as class exploitation, gender domination, racial subjugation, and environmental dominance, all coming from inherent contradictions of the capitalist system. It is evident that such contradictions simultaneously produce not only periodic economic crises – as famously theorized by Karl Marx – but also environmental crises, crises of care and political crises, which do not only happen individually, but also intersect one another, creating what Fraser calls "boundary struggles".

Production, for instance, intersects social reproduction in conflicts involving care, either private or public, remunerated or unpaid.

Land exploitation intersects expropriation in struggles over 'race', migration, and neo-imperialism. Perpetual accumulation logic butts up against the factual limited availability of natural resources, sparking struggles over land, energy, and biodiversity. Lastly, governance crises arise where global markets and big corporations clash with national states and public institutions, creating tensions over nature, authority and sovereignty of political power, ultimately undermining democracy.

Let us dive into each struggle and their respective boundaries one-by-one.

2.2.1 How Capitalism Relies on the Wealth Expropriation from its Periphery

According to Nancy Fraser, capitalism has been inextricably linked to racialized forms of oppression since its historical emergence in the sixteenth century. The consolidation of the capitalist system occurred alongside colonial expansion, slave trade and the extractivist exploitation of non-European territories. For this reason, the capitalist system has depended not only on exploitation in its narrow sense – i.e., the Marxist conception of extraction of surplus value from waged labor – but also on what Fraser refers to as expropriation: the illegitimate seizure of labor, land, and resources from populations considered inferior by means of race, culture or 'civilization degree'.

In this framework, Fraser rejects a contingent relation between capitalism and racial oppression, while arguing instead for a structural correlation (Fraser 2023). Through racialized logics, populations in regions labelled as 'peripheral' – both at global and national level – have been persistently dispossessed, subordinated and subjected to economic arrangements that transfer wealth to the 'center'. In her account, such expropriation takes several interlocking forms, such as predatory debt, land and resource dispossession, unequal exchange and unequal global value chains.

At the same time, global financial institutions such as the IMF, the World Bank and other private creditors, supposedly instituted to foster the Global South's development, have been deeply criticized for funding postcolonial governments on onerous terms: when they are unable to pay, they are forced into Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) which privatize, deregulate and cut social spending, transferring wealth from entire populations into the pockets of international investors and corporations, creating debt. This way, tax revenues previously dedicated to social protection and public spending are diverted to deficit compensation. Compounded with austerity policies, the vicious cycle is completed, and the social, economic and political requirements for development are cut at the base (Fraser 2023).

Fraser also highlights how global value chains constitute a contemporary form of racialized expropriation: labor-intensive manufacturing is frequently outsourced to countries in the BRICS bloc and other semi-peripheral regions, where labor is cheap and protections are weak. Multinational corporations therefore extract low-cost inputs – both labor and raw materials – from the Global South, while capturing most of the value at the higher ends of the chain through activities like finance, marketing, branding, and technological innovation concentrated in the Global North. Environmental expropriation follows similar paths: Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from the Northern economies often involves ecologically destructive practices such as over-extraction of natural resources, water contamination, carbon emissions, toxic dumping and land degradation. Yet, accountability is unevenly distributed, as the Global North frequently externalizes the ecological costs of its economic activities to the Global South, allowing itself to appear 'cleaner' and thus blaming environmental accountability on the latter. This dynamic, which Fraser frames as an ecological dimension of racialized expropriation (Fraser 2023), reflects and reinforces longstanding colonial hierarchies, even as it intensifies the material effects of climate change on the most ecologically vulnerable populations.

Finally, even those developing countries that opted for import-substitution end up expropriating what they on their account consider 'periphery', meaning indigenous and peasant communities, in order to build infrastructures and/or expand plantations, ultimately undermining their own populations and ending up being locked in a destructive loop, revealing the deep contradiction at the heart of capitalism, i.e., its dependence upon forms of social cooperation, environmental stability, and political legitimacy that it simultaneously corrodes.

Fraser's analysis of expropriation closely relates with Cedric J. Robinson's theory of racial capitalism, according to which Western capitalism emerged from racialized European feudalist roots and could not have developed without the racial discrimination and domination of the "non-Europeans" (Robinson 2000). Subsequently, he links the transatlantic slave trade of the mercantilist era of capitalist development directly to the economic expansion of Western capitalism, showing how slavery not only was normalized and legitimate, but also an essential feature of capitalist accumulation. His work complements Fraser's emphasizing how the historical and on-going extraction and expropriation of wealth from the Global South is inseparable from the logics of racial domination embedded in capitalism itself. In fact, Robinson states that capitalism is not a neutral economic system corrupted by racism, but rather one that is fundamentally structured by racial oppression, something that Fraser points out multiple times throughout her framework development.

To sum up, Fraser's analysis reveals how capitalism is not simply a system of wage labor and markets, but a civilizational structure rooted in expropriation. Racialized domination is not an accidental or transitional feature of global capitalism – it is constitutive. Understanding this is crucial for developing a transformative politics capable of confronting not only exploitation, but also the deeper, more insidious logics of racial capitalism, environmental depletion, and systemic dispossession.

2.2.2 Structural Gendered Oppression in the Social Reproduction Sphere

Discussions surrounding the current poli-crisis have been predominantly focusing on the environmental and economic crises, while neglecting social reproduction, indispensable precondition for the very existence of capitalist production (Fraser 2023). In a capitalist economy, social reproduction plays a very narrow and specific role: it serves to produce and replenish the working class, even though it is itself considered as 'unproductive' within mainstream economic frameworks (Fraser 2023).

The gendered division of the public and the private sphere has intensified during the industrial era, where men assumed the role of primary breadwinners, and women were relegated to unpaid care work within the household. This division of roles institutionalized an unequal power dynamic: the one who performs reproductive work is systematically subordinated to the one who earns the wage that sustains the family, even though it is the latter activity that depends on the former in the first place (Fraser 2023).

In other words, capitalist economic production is inherently dependent on social reproduction, as it cannot self-sustain, but despite its aim at commodities production and profit accumulation, it extensively relies on a large variety of social practices that reproduce both human life and workforce – activities that take place primarily out of the market sphere and that are for this reason often invisible at the eyes of mainstream economic analysis. These practices include biological reproduction, childrearing, emotional support, education and transmission of cultural and social norms, housework, etc. Such practices, largely carried out in the private sphere by women and marginalized communities, ensure that workers are born, raised and socially integrated in ways that make capitalist production possible. Without this indispensable labor, neither workforce, nor consumers, nor even a society would exist.

Simultaneously, neoliberal political economies led to the gradual structural dismantling of public services and social facilities. Beginning in the 1980s, with the rise of financial capitalism, austerity policies, privatization, and deregulation measures gained traction,

leading to the withdrawal of state support from essential institutions such as healthcare, education, childcare, elderly care, and housing; shifting the burden of social reproduction onto individuals and families, especially women – although not exclusively, who are socially conditioned and expected to absorb care labor without guaranteed access to sufficient time and resources.

In addition, the market expansion of precarious and flexible labor, characterized by lower salaries, job insecurity and the weakening of social protection, exacerbated the conflict between the demands of remunerated employment and social reproduction responsibility. This is particularly evident in the contemporary phase of financial capitalism, with the birth of 'two-earner household': the achievements of the second-wave feminist movement in securing women's entry into the labor market occurred without addressing the enduring burden of social reproduction, which remained largely on their shoulder, resulting in what is referred to as a 'double burden'. Neoliberalism in this way has played a checkmate on women's liberation, labelling itself as 'progressive' and celebrating diversity, meritocracy, and emancipation, while simultaneously dismantling social protection measures (Fraser, Arruzza, Bhattacharya 2019). Women were expected to receive the same treatment as men in the formal, productive economy, but no reconfiguration of the reproductive sphere was ever taken into consideration.

Care labor, in this context, is widely perceived not as a shared social responsibly, but rather as a burden that women must carry, something minimized or outsourced in exchange for individual freedom. This is what happens in Global North countries, where social reproduction needs often rely on transnational care chains, with the employment of migrant women, usually from the Global South or other areas considered peripheral. The global care economy provides in this context a clear illustration of Fraser's description of capitalist social reproduction's cannibal logic. The American professor Arlie Hochschild (2015) introduced the concept of "global care chains" to describe how women from poorer countries migrate to wealthier ones to perform domestic and care labour, often leaving their own families behind, shifting the care gap to their countries of origin (Hochschild 2015). This phenomenon is evident for example in Italy's reliance on migrant women – especially from Eastern Europe, the Philippines and Latin America (DOMINA, 2021) – to serve as live-in caregivers, demonstrates how the global division of care work reproduces colonial exploitation schemes and reinforces systemic hierarchies rooted in race, gender and class. The use of the term colonial in relation with the exploitation of unpaid women's care work was firstly introduced by Rosa Luxembourg in 1913 and later on by the German Sociologist Maria Mies, who, in her book Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale (2014), anticipates Fraser in

describing how Colonialism, the Patriarchy and the rise of Capitalism are deeply interconnected aspects of the same historical process. According to her, Capitalism was built on the colonization of women, nature and colonies, all exploited as invisible foundations of capitalist accumulation and considered irrelevant in economic theory despite being essential (Mies 2014).

Patriarchal Capitalism thus comes into being and reproduces itself through colonization processes that affect both bodies and the natural environment: from domestic labor essential to the workforce reproduction, to unpaid agricultural and subsistence activities, and the systematic extraction of 'free' resources from nature and the Global South. This system is further upheld by a legal and political apparatus that not only legitimizes such dynamics of exploitation and subordination but is itself affected by the logic of capitalist accumulation, therefore contributing to its perpetuation.

Over time, the inherent contradiction between capitalist accumulation and the sustainability of social reproduction generates recurrent crises, manifesting in the collapse and shortage of care infrastructures, demographic decline, widespread mental-health deterioration, and general instability. With the progressive erosion of social protection measures, entire societies face growing conditions of unsustainability: housing crises, privatization of care facilities and burnout diffusion put at risk the very fundamental conditions for human life and economic productivity. When the basic needs of life are no longer met, the social foundation of the capitalist system begins to unravel.

Capitalism, then, splits production from social reproduction, attributing value and recognition to the former only, cannibalizing care work without caring for its replenishment, ending up jeopardizing its own very conditions of possibility and thus revealing an inherent tendency to social reproduction crises. This internal contradiction demonstrates that care practices cannot continue to be neglected and devalued, as they represent a necessary precondition for a capitalist economy.

Fraser finally stresses that there is an urgent political need for recognition and reorganization of social reproduction, not as a marginal or subordinated realm, but as a central terrain of discourse, where alternative, new life-affirming systems can be imagined and constructed (Fraser 2023).

2.2.3 Capitalism And Its Structural Predatory Attitude Towards the Ecosystem

In the last few decades, climate change has become one of the main subjects of the global political agenda's debate. Everyone, from higher institutions to the media and all the way to single citizens, seems to finally recognize the urgency of the current situation: extreme

weather events, desertification, rising sea levels and biodiversity loss are plain for all to see. Yet, as widely stressed by Nancy Fraser, despite the widespread general agreement on the scientific basis of climate crises, a real common view on the actions required to stop it – and ideally reverse it – is completely lacking, and this is where the most profound differences emerge.

Fraser challenges the dominant narrative that attributes environmental accountability on humanity as a whole – a concept that has been condensed in the definition of Anthropocene (Crutzen, Stoermer 2000) – stating that, rather, those who are actually responsible, are specific social classes and economic logics historically determined. In particular the capitalist class is licensed by the system itself – together with the aforementioned preconditions that make it possible – to freely dispose of nature as both an infinitely replenishing source of land, water, energy, etc. and, at the same time, a bottomless dump for waste (Fraser 2023). To support her claim, she describes how different historical phases of capitalist development, from early mercantile capitalism to the current neoliberal phase, have each undergone their own specific form of environmental damage, reproducing a deeply extractive and hierarchical relationship between humans and nature.

While Fraser criticizes the universalizing narrative of the Anthropocene for neglecting capitalism's central role in ecological degradation, other scholars go deeper: Jason W. Moore, for instance, proposes the term "Capitalocene" to more accurately reflect the systemic origins of climate collapse in capitalist economies, questioning whether we are really living in the 'age of man' or rather in the 'age of capital' – the historical era shaped by endless accumulation (Moore 2017). From his perspective, environmental depletion is not merely a byproduct of industrialization, but a constitutive feature of capitalist expansion, visible for instance in the deforestation of the Amazon for cattle exports or the lithium extraction in the Atacama Desert for the development of 'green' technologies (Riofrancos 2023). Such perspectives expand Fraser's argument by revealing how ecological expropriation and economic growth are linked, even in supposedly 'sustainable' innovation.

In fact, the current environmental crisis does not appear out of nowhere, but it is the cumulative result of centuries of growing environmental degradation. From the colonial deforestation of the sixteenth century to industrial monocultures, from the mining industries of the nineteenth century to today's 'green' digital economy, each phase of capitalism has reproduced itself through a new mode of environmental devastation. What is peculiar about today's era of financial capitalism, as Fraser argues, is its reliance on global capital that circulates and operates completely constraint-free, shifting its ecological and political costs to places where it

is most convenient. This results in an escalating acceleration and multiplication of past crises, now converging into a single, enormous planetary emergency (Fraser 2023).

Here, Fraser's central concept of cannibal capitalism becomes key: the author invites the reader to think the capitalist system as a self-devouring machine, one that reproduces itself by systematically consuming its very conditions of possibility that lie outside of the economic realms – nature, care work, labor, democracy. In the environmental sphere, this translates into nature being not only exploited, but actually effectively transformed into a free productive input and, simultaneously, a global sink of waste pushed to collapse. Ecological cannibalization is therefore structural, and manifests itself by means of resource exhaustion, loss of biodiversity, climate destabilization, and, in general, the Earth's declining ability for self-replenishment.

In this context, multiple environmentalist movements – historically and geographically situated – have tried to resist to these dynamics. Through the Sixties and the Seventies, the North American ecological movement introduced a new diffused conscience around industrial development limitations, whereas Indigenous peoples' struggles in Latin America, such as Guaraní's and Mapuche's, have proposed radically alternative views to the extractivist paradigm. Further examples can also be the pacifist Chipko movement in India, which in the early 1970s resisted deforestation in the Himalayan region by symbolically hugging trees at the cost of their lives (Shiva 1988); and in African countries, women as Wangari Maathai – first environmentalist to ever win a Nobel Peace Prize – have guided campaigns for re-forestation and environmental justice. Moreover, most recently, global movements such as Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion have reported the ecological emergency in the squares and streets of western metropolis. Nevertheless, Fraser criticizes these movements – although without delegitimizing them – for still struggling to go beyond a narrowly environmentalist perspective, ending up isolating the ecological crisis from its broader economic and systemic causes.

It is in this gap that Fraser stresses the necessity for a new ecopolitics, one that is both "trans-environmentalist" and "anti-capitalist" (Fraser 2023). With 'trans-environmentalist', the author refers to an approach going beyond traditional environmentalism, which tends to focus excessively on nature's preservation or carbon emissions reduction without further questioning the foundations of the capitalist system. 'Trans-environmentalism', on the contrary, acknowledges that the ecological crisis is deeply intertwined with social, economic and political crises, thus requiring a much transformative action capable of addressing them conjointly. In opposition to capitalism's predatory logic, then, trans-environmental

ecopolitics aims at breaking the cannibalistic loop by placing concrete limits on accumulation, and by bringing reproduction of life and ecological justice to the center of the discussion, contributing to the transformation of the entire socioeconomic paradigm.

This approach also distinguishes itself from the so-called 'green capitalism', i.e., the mainstream agenda that aims at reconciling capitalist growth and environmental sustainability through technological innovation and market activity in general. Fraser strongly criticizes this vision, that she considers as a sort of 'greenwashing': superficial management of environmental symptoms which maintains intact underlying power dynamics (Fraser 2023).

According to her, an authentic post-capitalist, radical ecopolitics must therefore reject the logic of endless growth and promote forms of production and social reproduction that are de-marketed, democratic, and consciously respectful of planetary limits.

2.2.4 Capital's Dependence On – And Rejection Of – Political Power

The fourth core contradiction of capitalism identified by Nancy Fraser concerns political power. Capitalism depends on political institutions for the legal framework and institutional mechanisms that legitimize and sustain it, however, at the same time, it systematically undermines them (Fraser 2023). For instance, capitalism requires a legal system to uphold private property rights, contract law and corporate protection. Yet, once such systems are in place, large corporations often lobby to weaken these very structures, such as by pushing for deregulation to avoid accountability.

Capitalist economies also require regulatory frameworks, like environmental protections and labor laws, to function smoothly. However, capital tends to oppose such measures in pursuit of cost reduction. Simultaneously, firms depend on human capital, infrastructures and healthcare systems, typically funded by the state. Under the neoliberal wave of privatization, however, these public institutions are increasingly subordinated to logics of capitalist accumulation (Fraser 2023). Moreover, corporations benefit from public services and goods financed through taxation, while simultaneously attempting to circumvent the very system that funds them.

Thus, the political sphere is not external to capitalism, nor is it merely regulatory: it is a fundamental condition of its existence. Yet, it is also one of its victims. Capital tends to hollow out political institutions, reducing them to instruments of private accumulation rather than expressions of collective will. In this way, capitalism cannibalizes the public sphere, subordinating it to market imperatives

and stripping it of the capacity to regulate the economy in public interest (Fraser 2023).

This process reflects one of Fraser's central arguments: capitalism thrives through structural separations: between production and reproduction, society and nature, economy and politics. The separation of the economy from politics results in the depoliticization of fundamental economic decisions, which are driven by profit maximization rather than the fulfillment of collective or public needs. Fraser defines this dynamic as the capitalist tendency to devour political power in service of private interests, thus generating periodic political crises (Fraser 2023). These crises are not anomalies; they are the logical outcome of a system that, in the name of endless accumulation, erodes and destabilizes the very institutions that legitimize it. Public power, both national and transnational, is reduced to a mere facilitator of market dynamics. Consequently, democratic legitimacy is weakened, paving the way for rising distrust in political representation and the growth of authoritarian and populist forces.

Fraser's diagnosis of capitalism's parasitic relationship to political institutions mirrors Antonio Gramsci's concept of "passive revolution" and "crisis of hegemony". According to Gramsci, dominant social orders do not respond to legitimacy crises handing over power, but rather they reorganize it in technocratic or authoritarian directions, this transformation process "from above" allows the élites to neutralize social conflict and thus preserve their position of power (Gramsci 1975). Fraser, in an analogous way, analyzes how capitalism devours democracy by, for instance, undermining the welfare state, promoting technocratic management or delegating decision-making powers to non-elected entities – such as the ECB, IMF, etc. This is a clear example of passive revolution: power reorganizes itself to adapt and face the crisis, without actually being radically questioned. On the other hand, Gramsci talks about "crisis of hegemony" – or "crisis of authority" – when dominant classes loose the mass' consensus and their power starts to be doubted, meaning that the masses start to question the paradigm and a period of crisis is coming, wherein a new, alternative force must rise and substitute the current one, but does not yet exist. This results in a period of stalemate, uncertainty, and conflict. Such crisis, in Gramsci's words, consist precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born (Gramsci 1975). Fraser mirrors this idea in her earlier work called, precisely, The Old is Dying and the New Cannot Be Born (2019), where she addresses the political and democratic crisis of neoliberalism, which hollowed out public institutions from their representative function, generating uncertainty, distrust, populisms and authoritarian regimes. As Gramsci, Fraser also identifies a transitional period of crisis in which the capitalist domain loses legitimacy but nevertheless perpetuates through new forms of control. As noted, the political crisis is only one aspect of a

broader systemic crisis that also includes ecological destruction, the collapse of social reproduction, and economic volatility (Fraser 2019).

Fraser argues that each historical phase of capitalist development has been shaped by – and has responded to – political instability. Yet, she emphasizes, the current phase of neoliberal capitalism is particularly cannibal. Neoliberalism has promoted the outsourcing of public services, the deregulation of financial markets, and the curtailment of democratic control – all under the rhetoric of efficiency and modernization. The real outcome, however, has been the hollowing out of democratic institutions, which are increasingly incapable of addressing the social and ecological crises that capitalism itself generates.

Fraser also stresses that capitalism is fundamentally undemocratic (Fraser 2019), not only in its relationship with political institutions but also in the social power structures it creates. Vast wealth inequalities translate into political inequalities. The mainstream claim that 'consumers vote with their wallets' is inherently skewed: those with greatest purchasing power effectively have more 'votes'. Capitalists use their economic power to dominate public discourse, shape political agendas, and finance candidates, thereby distorting democratic representation and steering political decision-making toward plutocratic ends.

In summary, one of Fraser's key contentions is that capitalism is inherently anti-democratic. The capitalist economy operates as a form of "unpolitical private power," systematically excluding democratic deliberation over crucial matters. Decisions about how to allocate surplus, which sectors to develop, and how to distribute resources are left to market forces or technocratic elites, rather than subject to democratic control (Fraser 2023). Democracy, from the perspective of capital, is tolerable only as far as it does not interfere with the imperative of endless accumulation.

In response, Fraser does not advocate mere reformism. Instead, she calls for the creation of a counter-hegemonic project that unites struggles against economic exploitation, ecological destruction, gender oppression and racial marginalization. This project must aim at systemic transformation: reforming capitalism is not enough. What is needed is a post-capitalist social order that reintegrates politics, care, the environment, and democracy as ends in themselves – not as resources to be exploited.

2.2.5 Boundary Struggles

As insofar described, contemporary capitalism is undergoing a general crisis, characterized by intertwined and mutually reinforcing rundowns across key societal sphere – social reproduction, the environment, politics, and the economy – that can no longer be

treated as isolated, single-issue problems. Rather, there is a need for a strategy to assess them in a combined and strategic way; one that is, first of all, anti-capitalist. This necessity is rooted in the fact that capitalism treats its non-economic background conditions as if they were, in fact, economic – cannibalizing them through commodification.

The sphere of social reproduction is undergoing a crisis of care, generated by a contradiction rooted in the institutional separation between production and reproduction. It is characterized by gender domination and implies gender violence as well as the exploitation, devaluation and neglection of feminized care labor.

The sphere of nature is undergoing an environmental crisis of epochal dimensions, and it is rooted in the institutional, positivist separation between human and non-human nature, presuming the domination of the former on the latter. It is characterized by the treatment of nature as a free input source and, at the same time, an endless, ever-replenishing sink for waste. The ongoing ecological emergency is probably the most threatening among the others, as the collapse of the ecosystem would immediately pose at risk the very possibilities for life itself.

The political realm, at the same time, is facing a breakdown of democratic legitimacy, governance, and public power as expression of collective will. The current neoliberal phase of capitalism undermines state capacities to protect the other background conditions from capitalist predatory activity. The contradiction that generates the crisis lies primarily in the wave of privatization and commodification of public spaces and discourses, reducing the public and political sphere to mere tools at service of accumulation and private appropriation.

Finally, labour exploitation is deepened at a global level by ever-growing inequality, based on various forms of wealth expropriation from the Global South that go together with racial oppression. Indeed, capitalism relies not only on wage labour but also on the ongoing dispossession of communities below the global color line through extractivism, land grabs and detriment, dispossession, and exploitation. These processes reinforce a center/periphery dynamic, where wealth is systematically transferred from racialized and/or marginalized populations to core capitalist powers.

It is also important to underline that these 'boundary struggles', while rooted in capitalism's structural contradictions, do not evenly affect different social groups. Rather, they tend to disproportionately impact those who are already occupying a position of vulnerability and especially those who find themselves at the intersection of multiple axes of oppression, i.e., migrant people, people of color, queer people, disabled people, etc. This uneven distribution of social costs reveals how intersectionality as a lens allows us to understand how race,

gender, class, migration status and ability degree intersect to create compounded vulnerabilities. Fraser herself, especially in later works and interviews (Fraser, Maiguashca, Masquelier 2024), has pointed out that power and resistance must be theorized considering these intersecting oppressions, rather than along isolated axis. Her theory of justice – based on combined redistribution, recognition, and representation – resonates closely with the work of other scholars such as Iris Marion Young and Nancy Naples, paving the way for addressing multiple levels of injustice (Fraser, Naples 2004; Dorrien 2021).

Fraser multiple times stresses the fact that these contradictions do not operate in isolation but interact and exacerbate one another in such an intimate and intricate way that none of them can really be understood when considered on its own (Fraser 2023). Land and ecosystems detriment directly compromises the material condition for care and everyday life. When air and water are polluted, and land is made infertile, it becomes impossible to sustain healthy families and communities whatsoever. Environmental disasters and desertification are causing the displacement of entire populations, forcing especially women, children, and elderly people to migrate, often leading to situations of growing uncertainty and violence. Moreover, despite the evidence of the current situation, climate refugees are still not recognized by the international law system, further exacerbating their insecurity. Thus, the environmental crisis is deeply entangled with the social reproduction crisis, as when capital jeopardizes the former, also jeopardizes the latter. At the same time, it is public powers that legitimize and provide the means for capital's predatory attitude on communities and ecosystems, and it is that same institutions that people turn to when in danger. For this reason, struggles that are both social and environmental, are inevitably also political. Finally, Fraser concludes, the just-mentioned dynamics are deeply intertwined with expropriation as well. By appropriating the land for its often predatory and extractive activity, capital expropriates entire human communities of the material basis for their very subsistence, generating simultaneously a crisis of social and ecological nature (Fraser 2023).

In those parts of the world where ecological collapse is relatively not-so-evident, i.e., the Global North, the rise of neoliberal capitalism has de-powered democratic institutions, shifting decision-making power from public governance to unaccountable market forces driven by the exclusive logic of accumulation. States often serve capital interests, through deregulation, tax heavens and austerity policies, while repressing dissent and failing to guarantee basic social protection measures. This undermines both legitimacy and sovereignty, pushing away the people from the political space as they feel disempowered and disposable. On the other hand, the expansion of low-wage and precarious labour – especially in care sectors – reveals

the parasitic relation between capital and reproduction, as the former exploits the latter while refusing to remunerate it or support it adequately. As – especially but not exclusively – women and working-class people are forced into paid labor behind the threat of starvation without any corresponding social care service, the reproduction of life itself becomes precarious and unsustainable, pushing it towards breakdown.

These crises historically and periodically take place, since whether social, natural, or political, none of these spheres is ruled by capitalist logics – such as growth, efficiency, accumulation, merit, negative freedom, etc. – but rather follows an ontological grammar of its own. For instance, social reproduction values ideals of care, mutuality, community, and solidarity; nonhuman nature, much similar to social reproduction, values safeguard, time, patience, care, and justice; polity practices are oriented towards democracy, self-determination, and collective autonomy (Fraser 2023). This implies that although these background conditions are essential for capitalist realization of commodity production, labor exploitation and capital accumulation, they cannot be subjugated to their sole economic function *ad infinitum*. For this reason, Fraser contends that throughout the entire history of capitalist development there have always been moments of turmoil characterized by some sort of 'resistance' of these non-economic spheres. According to her, it is their very core that lurk potential agents of critical change, that, despite them being constantly attacked and plundered, continue resisting.

In this perspective, the socio-ecological crises produced by cannibal capitalism fall most heavily on precarious workers, women, racialized populations, Indigenous peoples, undocumented migrants, and all those excluded from political representation or economic participation. These categories are not just victims; but they are also often the primary agents of resistance, precisely because they experience the contradictions most acutely. For this reason, it is essential to listen to their voices first when imagining alternative solutions.

Italian scholars such as Filippo Barbera have contributed to this reflection by highlighting how current capitalism exacerbates vulnerability and invisibility, from an Italian perspective. Barbera analyzed how neoliberalism offloads systemic risks onto fragile populations who are denied both protection and recognition (Barbera 2016). This reinforces Fraser's point: the crisis of capitalism is not just universal and systemic, but selectively brutal onto those who already find themselves in a condition of vulnerability and/or oppression.

Fraser concludes her analysis by stressing the necessity for an emancipatory movement that not only embraces the Marxist ideals for class liberation, but also feminist, ecological, political, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist. A real "counter-hegemonic" project of social transformation.

To recap, the author frames said 'boundary struggles' as both symptoms of capitalism's contradictions and sites of resistance and potential change. These conflicts arise at the intersection of care, ecology, and sovereignty, where the commodification logics of capitalism are challenged and alternative value systems are proposed. For example, the Zapatistas movement in Chapas, Mexico, and the Rojava autonomous administration in Northern Syria, both advance projects that explicitly rethink care, gender roles, ecology, and direct democracy outside the capitalist paradigm. Moreover, feminist scholars such as Silvia Federici have emphasized that resistance and community in the reproductive sphere, through for instance communal kitchens, neighborhood assemblies, or mutual aid networks, can already preface alternative forms of life beyond the market (Federici 2012). These struggles, while situated in their own space and time, can be seen as catalyzers of what Fraser calls "counter-hegemonic" projects: they not only react to crises, but actively propose emancipatory futures that de-link human life and well-being from capital accumulation.

Thus, understanding how intersectionality, inequality and vulnerability interplay and are embedded in boundary struggles is not a marginal concern but it is essential to imagine viable alternatives to the current paradigm. A truly counter-hegemonic project must incorporate the voices of those at the margins, putting them at the center of discourse for the realization of an emancipatory political vision.

Starting from this framework, the next chapter will delve into the specific case of the city of Venice. Apparently distant from the canonical sites of global capitalism, Venice instead embodies, in peculiar and intensified forms, the same cannibalistic dynamics described by Fraser: expropriation of value through mass tourism, the hollowing out of the public and political spheres, a crisis in social reproduction, and the endangerment of the lagoon's ecological balance. Analyzing Venice through the lens of Cannibal Capitalism thus implies understanding how systemic contradictions manifest at the urban and local level as well, suggesting the urgent need to radically rethink our ways of inhabiting, producing, caring, and governing.

2.3 The City of Venice and the Ways in Which it Cannibalizes Itself

Venice, whose founding dates back to more than a thousand and six-hundred years ago, has a rich and complex history, inextricably linked to its lagoon. Established as a shelter on lagoon islands and developed through a delicate equilibrium between land and water, Venice was for a long time a mercantile power, with a deep knowledge of the surrounding environment.

This fragile equilibrium, however, began to unravel with the advent of industrial modernity and, in particular, with the construction of Porto Marghera in 1917. The post-war transformations of the twentieth century, together with pivotal events such as the catastrophic flood of 1966 known as 'Acqua Granda', marked the beginning of a prolonged process of depopulation of the historic center and an increasing dependence on tourism as the city's primary source of wealth.

Today, Venice is frequently cited as an emblem case of overtourism, as well as urban and ecological fragility. As a socio-ecosystem shaped by centuries of interaction between anthropogenic and natural elements, the city now finds itself at the crossroads of multiple overlapping and self-feeding crises, the most threatening of which seems to be the irreversible rise in sea levels. An amphibious city and UNESCO World Heritage Site, Venice is a privileged location for critical analysis within the framework of the Anthropocene, or as Stefano Beggiora and Serenella Iovino put it, a planetary kaleidoscope for all the dynamics that characterize the Anthropocene (Serenella, Beggiora 2021). The purpose of this chapter is to frame Venice as a concrete space in which the four structural crises of capitalism identified by Nancy Fraser manifest themselves.

The crisis of expropriation emerges in the commodification of the city for external consumption, often to the detriment of its own local population; the crisis of social reproduction manifests in the steady demographic decline, the displacement of residents, and the gradual erosion of the city's social fabric; the ecological crisis is blatant in the degradation of the lagoon's equilibrium and the vulnerability of the local ecosystem due to oppressive anthropogenic intervention; and finally, the political crisis unfolds through governance ineffectiveness, institutional inefficacy and the subordination of public decision-making to private economic interests. As described in the previous chapter, these diverse crises do not take place as separate phenomena, but are deeply interconnected, and it is impossible to overcome them by treating them separately.

Let us delve into each sphere's particular characteristics, to later address them in the general picture and identify 'resisting' elements that can function as potential incubators for radical change.

2.3.1 Tourism Monoculture, Wealth Expropriation

The economic structure of the Metropolitan City of Venice offers a clear illustration of the crisis of expropriation as Nancy Fraser describes it: a process through which value is systematically extracted from a territory and its inhabitants, without being reinvested in their own development and for the benefit of their collective life (Fraser 2023). Professor Marina Garcés, in a conference held in Barcelona in 2014,

describes precisely how the tourist economy, through its extractivist logic, differences little from colonial economies. The two dimensions in fact share economic dependence, the intensive exploitation of a finite resource, a form of development that produces wealth but instead of redistributing it, it centralizes it, the disintegration of the social fabric, making rents – i.e., passive income – the most desirable expectation of wealth, and, finally, the oligarchic – not to say plutocratic – concentration of decision-making power (Gracés 2014).

As one of Italy's most iconic tourist destinations, Venice has, particularly in recent decades, become an infamously paradigmatic example of touristification. As other tourism destinations victims of their own success, the city suffers the consequences of uncontrolled tourism growth, leading to a radical transformation of commercial and residential structures, as well as the depauperating of its very social fabric. This phenomenon has drastically intensified in the last few decades, with the explosion of peer-to-peer short-term holiday rental platforms such as Airbnb and Booking.com, which have proliferated across the entire historic city (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019) as well as the mainland. In 2021, the number of daily presences on the main island was estimated at around 100.000 visitors – a threshold that will be later on often exceeded – while a recent study on the city's tourism carrying capacity suggests that the optimal number should be approximately 52.000 (Bertocchi, Camatti, Giove, van Der Borg 2020).

Such dynamics have been having devastating consequences for both Venice's social structure and its natural environment, rendering the city increasingly inhabitable not only for residents but also for the delicate ecosystem of the lagoon. Locals feel more and more like strangers in their own city, witnessing the erosion of essential services in favor of tourist-oriented amenities. The unregulated proliferation of restaurants, bars, souvenir shops and hotels inevitably restructured the local job market, making it increasingly difficult to find employment outside the tourism sector.

The city's progressive transition to tourism monoculture in terms of employment and lifestyle has produced an economically fragile and highly dependent system. The vast majority of available jobs are low-skilled, low-waged, and precarious, either related to tourism production chains or shipbuilding. In this whole picture of less qualified jobs, it is important to notice how these positions are often occupied by women, migrants and students, whose labour remains underpaid, invisible, and easily replaceable. Indeed, although tourism is often considered a high-productivity sector, it is typically characterized by low net wages, which limits its capacity to foster long-term economic growth (Musu 2001). This phenomenon further exacerbates dynamics of spatial segregation of migrant and low-income people to the peripheral zones of the Metropolitan City, mainly

Mestre and Marghera, accentuating insecurity and social instability in such areas in particular (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024).

Workers sense, the expropriation of value does not occur solely through the material dispossession of those people who cannot afford to live in the ever-more expensive historical city where they often – although not exclusively – work, but also through the racialized and gendered segmentation of the labour market, where entire categories of workers are confined to marginal roles whose ultimate function is to sustain the candid and impeccable city's tourist image, while remaining excluded from both its governance and benefits. At the same time, the wealth generated by mass tourism – which in 2023 comprehensively spent around 939,34 million Euros in the City (ANSA, 2024) – is largely siphoned off by external agents such as multinational hotel chains, peer-to-peer hospitality platforms and private real estate investors, through mechanisms of deregulated markets, fiscal elusion and privatization of public assets.

Concisely, the widespread prevalence of precarious work, the housing crisis, the increasing living costs of the island and the growing commodification of urban spaces, have profoundly altered the Venetian social fabric. Indeed, significant segments of the resident population have been marginalized or effectively displaced, ultimately eroding the very conditions that once made Venice a living city.

2.3.2 The Crisis of Care in a Hollowing Venice

The most blatant crisis that Venice is going through nowadays is a crisis of social reproduction. In a city progressively hollowed out from its inhabitants, what is missing is not only the locals' presence but the very conditions that permit daily life and reciprocal care. As underlined by Nancy Fraser (2023), contemporary capitalism is rooted in structural expropriation of reproductive activities, often rendered invisible and devalued, but that nevertheless constitute the precondition of economic production and capital accumulation: without care work, no economic system would be able to self-sustain. In Venice, social reproduction has been thinned out and/or progressively dislocated, marginalized, and undermined.

The great residential exodus that characterizes the entire city and especially the historical center is not merely the result of economic and urban-planning dynamics, but symptoms of a deeper, structural social crisis. The data speaks for itself: according to the Municipality of Venice (2024), in 1951, the island reached its peak in number of residents, with 174,808 inhabitants in the historical center; in 2024, less than 30% remain, with only 48,489 people. The city center, once a place of dwelling, has become a hollow shell, stripped of its essential social elements. Community and neighborhood relationships, local

services, caring facilities for children, elderly people and those more vulnerable categories of people have been progressively dismantled. The closing of schools, daycare centers, clinics, shops, and gathering spaces is not casual: it is a direct indicator of the disappearance of the social fabric. Notably, districts like Cannaregio and Castello – traditionally among the most populus – have been hit the hardest by the disappearance of services (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019). Moreover, this erosion is strictly linked with the city's geography: those who can afford to remain in the historic center do so at great cost, while those who cannot are forced to move to Mestre or Marghera, more residential areas – although increasingly gentrified – but characterized with growing insecurity and service inadequacy.

Today's situation is anything but surprising if one looks back at nineteenth- and early twentieth century Venice: a deeply unequal, unhealthy, ghostly city, and yet one of *forestieri*'s (foreign visitors) favorite destinations. Thomas Mann, in his *Death in Venice* (1911, 291), offers a perfect image of that era:

> That was Venice, the cajoling and dubius beauty—this city, half fairy tale, half tourist trap, where art had once voluptuously run riot in the putrid air […] he also recalled that the city was ill, but concealing its illness out of greed.

The architect and urban planner Paola Somma, in her work *Non è Città per Poveri* (2024) thoroughly describes how the city's recent history is deeply shaped by class zoning. She explains how the ruling classes have systematically worked to empty, de-urbanize and 'sanitize' the city of its poorer residents, an essential process in enabling promoting the full exploitation of Venice's land value potential and today still on-going.

Within this context, care work suffered a double process of precarization and invisibilization: on the one hand, it is increasingly outsourced to migrant women, often under informal or precarious conditions. On the other hand, informal forms of care – embedded in neighborhood networks, associations, and volunteerism – have been left alone to cope with public disinvestment. According to the DOMINA observatory on domestic work (2024), ISTAT estimated that in Italy, around 3,3 million people are irregularly employed in this sector, the vast majority of which are women. This shift of social reproduction towards the private or informal sphere is not casual: it represents a structural offloading of responsibility by public institutions, placing the burden of crisis management on families and, above all, women.

The lack, or even absence, of structured public policies to guarantee housing, care, education, social spaces, and services

makes clear the state's and local administrations' disinvestment in social reproduction. As Bertocchi and Visentin (2019) observed, while productive sectors linked to tourism and logistics are in constant and rapid expansion, there is a lack of planning aimed at supporting the quality of life, especially of those who habitually reside in the city.

Venice is not an isolated case, as other cities around the world are suffering the same dynamics, but perhaps it constitutes one of the most blatant evidence of the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism, who, in order to pursue the accumulation of profit at all costs, is willing to sacrifice life itself. To resist this trajectory today means reclaiming the city as a space for shared life, connection, and reproduction; it means placing care at the center of discourse.

2.3.3 The City that Sinks: Between Ecological Fragility and Infrastructural Violence

Its fragility has always been a hallmark of the city of Venice. An inherent vulnerability, historically romanticized by its nostalgic and decadent traits that for centuries have seduced and inspired artists and writers from around the world. However, in the eyes of those who habitually reside in the city, the atmosphere is anything but romantic; what emerges is a structural crisis that intertwines environmental degradation, infrastructural violence, and climate change.

Among the main causes of this ecological drift lies infrastructural violence, by-product of a 'philosophy of engineering', meaning the construction of large-scale works meant to save the city – historically a virtuous example of land and water management – but which end up worsening the situation in the long-run. The modern emblematic example of such philosophy is the MOSE project, a system of mobile gates able to shield the city from the highest floods, active since 2020 after fifty years of planning. Entirely paid by the Italian government for €6 billion, it is both one of the largest public works and corruption cases worldwide. Ever since its entry into function in 2021, it has been proven highly effective, but it is clear today that the progression of climate change is advancing so rapidly that the MOSE can no longer be considered a long-term solution (Giupponi 2022). Its implementation was accelerated after the exceptional flood (*acqua alta*) of November 2019, warning of a phenomenon that is set to become increasingly frequent and violent, a product of the combination between sea level rise and land subsidence, which make Venice one of the world sites most threatened by climate change (Capitani 2022). In addition to these phenomena there is that of wave motion, caused by the passage of large cruise ships through the Giudecca Canal – today no longer in vogue, thanks to public protests and the efforts of the No Grandi Navi Committee – as well as the city's maritime traffic, which contribute

to bank erosion and soil salinization, damaging historic buildings and making maintenance more and more difficult and expensive. The Stockholm Water Prize 2023 Andrea Rinaldo paints a dramatic picture of such phenomena, claiming that in the span of only sixty years, the city will inexorably rot, and the lagoon disappear (Rinaldo 2024).

Another, earlier, example of last-century technocratic mentality is that of Porto Marghera, founded in 1917, which marked the beginning a new phase in the city's history: that of industrial economic growth and that of 'bonifica umana' (*human reclamation*), i.e., the expulsion of the poor and working class from the 'rich' historical center (Capitani 2022). The first Venetian environmental movements denounced the effects of this mega-industrialization plan, which, completely lacking in regulations, procedures and protection protocols, caused profound damage to the entire lagoon ecosystem, contaminating water, soil and air, with very severe health hazards for the environment, workers and the entire population, considered as mere negative externalities (Tsionki 2022). Today, Porto Marghera's golden years are long gone, and what is left is a desolated landscape, polluted and largely abandoned, awaiting appropriate remediation policies to restore which is one of the most toxic areas in Europe. Former industrial areas, once the heart of twentieth century manufacturing Venice, now remain as open wounds, noxious spaces where nature has been compromised and ecological reconversion in only announced. The long-lasting consequences of Marghera's industrial activity do not only manifest in environmental degradation, but also through workers' illness due to the exposure to toxic substances, whose symptoms develop over time and whose infection is expected to peak between the 2010s and the 2030s (Tsionki 2022). The history of Porto Marghera offers a precious insight into capital's cannibal logic, which first exploits and intensively consumes a territory – in environmental and social terms – to then abandon it once its resources have been exhausted. In this sense, Porto Marghera shows how the capitalist exploitation of non-economic conditions (work, nature, community) not only precedes the crisis, but constitutes its very matrix.

It is not difficult to deduce, then, that the higher costs of such environmental crisis are definitely not burdened on tourists, nor large real estate investors. Rather, they weight on the remaining population, and the vulnerable categories in particular such as elderly people, the working class and the low-income inhabitants of the Metropolitan City, especially those who live in the lower floors or reside in the peripheral areas, away from the eyes of the paying tourists – according to tradition.

Everything said, it is blatant how the current crisis is not an isolated phenomenon, nor a recent one, but rather the result of a long transformation process of an entire city – i.e., a public space supposedly apt to welcome and foster human life – into a

value-producing machine, a product to be consumed, an open-air museum, whose logics are incompatible with life itself. It is the result of an urban and productive system designed for profit accumulation that relies on those very conditions that make the production of profit possible in the first place, i.e., the environment, the public spaces, and social reproduction, providing us once again with a perfect picture of cannibal capitalism. Venice's ecological collapse, then, is not only about the environment; it belongs to a system of inequality, displacement and systemic neglect.

As widely argued by the authors cited so far, the contradiction between capital and nature cannot be resolved through isolated technical fixes, rather, what is needed is a transformative popular movement, one that does not merely aim at preserving the environment, but seeks to re-think and reorganize the ways of living, producing and inhabiting the city. In the case of Venice, this means reimagining its spaces as a living ecosystem, one that cooperates with nature instead of trying to dominate it, one where environmental justice and social reproduction are not only mutually reinforcing but central pillars for long-term sustainable development.

2.3.4 "Venice is not Disneyland": Neoliberal Governance, Corporate Rationality and Democratic Erosion

The industrial bloom that characterized the aftermath of the Second World War was followed by an era of economic decline and skepticism about the techno-capitalist governance of the city of Venice began to spread. In the 1980s, with the establishment of neoliberalism, things began to change, but not for the better. Private initiative and corporate philosophy take hold, giving rise to a new trend of privatization and deregulation. The city's political institutions have gradually been hollowed out and replaced by a model of urban governance that is increasingly centralized and aligned with corporate logic, subtracting ground from democratic participation. In line with Nancy Fraser's analysis of capitalism's political contradiction, the case of Venice shows how the institutions that are supposed to regulate and mitigate capital's cannibalistic tendencies are instead coerced into serving its expansion (Fraser 2023).

This shift has produced a clear erosion of local representative institutions, as decision-making power is progressively removed from the municipal, democratic level. The governance of the city has come to resemble what David Harvey defines "urban entrepreneurialism" (Harvey 1989), a model in which public administrations behave as if they were private companies: maximizing short-term returns, managing the city as a brand, and privileging investors over its own residents.

Internal to this logic lies the so-called 'specialty of Venice': in 1973, the Special Law for the city was approved, recognizing the need to safeguard it in light of its social and environmental vulnerabilities. This legal status, initially effective in supporting the protection and revitalization of the metropolitan area (Borelli, Busacca 2020), has, over the decades, been progressively stripped out of its original meaning and increasingly used to justify exceptional measures aimed at market liberalization and the commodification of the urban space. All of this at the expenses of the residents and especially the working class, whose hardships have, in the last century, been systematically exploited to justify the 'special aid' that city needs, only for the funds obtained to ultimately benefit the wealthier classes (Somma 2024).

In this context, urban management becomes a fertile field for speculation. Public assets are sold off, planning is increasingly devoted to private projects, and what is supposed to be a common good, is commodified and rendered profitable. Citizens, residents, and social movements are systematically excluded from the processes that determine the future of the city, as their space for democratic deliberation is progressively eaten out. The clearest example of such neoliberal rationality is the recent introduction of the ticket entrance to the historic center, finally implemented starting from April 18, 2025, after decades of debate. Officially presented as a tool for regulating tourist flows, it effectively monetizes public space, transforming the city into a consumable commodity instead of addressing the problem at its roots. Thus, far from representing a break from past tendencies, this measure is the culmination of a governance model that conceives the city less as a living community space and more as a product to be consumed (Settis 2014). Rather than opposing capital's predatory logic, political governance becomes one of its enablers, and this is precisely what Fraser means when discussing capital's cannibalization of the public sphere (Fraser 2023).

Therefore, the expropriation Venice is experiencing, cannot be solely understood in economic or social terms. It is also deeply embedded in the very institutional logic that governs the city, where redistributive and participatory functions are abandoned in favor of efficiency, monetization, and managerialism. In this scenario, the city becomes an emblematic case of the fact that neoliberalism does not merely dismantle democracy but reconfigures it: replacing public participation with market logic, and citizenship with consumerism, in the name of growth, efficiency, economic liberty.

The future of the city, then, will depend not only on resisting its gradual commodification, but on reclaiming the political sphere as a space of collective discourse and cooperation. It will be useful to change perspective and promote not only the most profitable economic interests, but also the associations, grassroots initiatives, damaged economic activities such as craftmanship so that they can

fulfill their collective functions. Venice, so deeply affected by the contradictions of modernity and postmodernity, shaken by climate change and overtourism, needs to imagine new forms of political participation, able to bring back community and democracy at the center of political attention (Borelli, Busacca 2020).

Boundary Struggles in Venice: Intersecting Crises and Sites of Resistance

Venice, as described insofar, perfectly incarnates contemporary capitalism's inherent contradictions, where different crises – social, ecological, political, and economic – do not present themselves as isolated phenomena but intersect and exacerbate each other. In this context, in the Venetian reality we can detect what Fraser calls "boundary struggles" (Fraser 2023): tensions that rise where capitalism clashes with its own very conditions of possibility, meaning social reproduction, nature, the public sphere and economic relations – consuming them in the attempt to perpetuate its accumulation cycle.

To begin, the crisis of expropriation manifests itself in the continuous extraction of value from the city through mass tourism, with no effective reinvestment in its social or ecological well-being. The commodification of housing through peer-to-peer short-term rent platforms such as Airbnb has been led not only by foreign investors, but very often by residents themselves, driven by the imperative to extract value from their properties in a precarious economic environment. This vicious dynamic exemplifies a real "tragedy of the commons" (Hardin 1968): the short-term individual gain results in long-term collective harm, as the local population unintentionally contributes to the erosion – and cannibalization – of its own urban space and community. This resulted in a rapid reduction of housing offer for new residents and the consequent expulsion of entire population segments to the mainland, fueling the demographic decline and weakening the community networks that sustain everyday urban life. David Harvey calls this "accumulation by dispossession": a violent process that removes the poor to make way for profitable urban projects. This way, many cities worldwide including Venice are increasingly shaped by the desires of elites, not the needs of ordinary people (Harvey 2015).

This fuels a social reproduction crisis, characterized by the dramatic progressive depopulation of the historical center, combined with the gradual disappearance of essential community services, schools, clinics and social spaces. The real estate market logic made it almost impossible for families, young people, students, and low-income workers to live in the city, in favor of highly profitable tourist rents. This dynamic transformed Venice from an inhabited place to a walkable postcard, a showcase for tourist consumption, with a resident population today reduced to less than one third of what was in the fifties.

The ecological crisis is equally evident: the lagoon equilibrium has for decades been compromised by invasive infrastructural interventions such as the industrialization of Porto Marghera and the MOSE construction. Climate change is causing sea level rise, which is menacing the very survival of the city, whereas pollution, bank erosion and the loss of biodiversity are threatening the entire lagoon's ecosystem. In this context it is clear how environmental protection has always been subordinated to the search for economic profit, reproducing the cannibalistic logic of capitalism that consumes nature as a free, self-replenishing resource to be dominated and exploited.

Finally, the political sphere as well is undergoing a state of profound crisis: rather than counterbalancing market pressures, local institutions have often facilitated them through privatization and deregulation policies, proving a managerial and technocratic approach to the urban space, favoring the commodification of the city, which ends up being managed more as a brand than a shared commons.

Though analytically distinct, these crises overlap: the exodus of residents weakens the social fabric and community's ability to care for its environment; environmental degradation threatens the city's very existence and harms the most vulnerable; political capital 'corruption' undermines democratic potential for resistance and change. In this scenario, as Fraser (2023) argues, it is often those most exposed to the contradictions of capitalism who also generate potential powerful practices of resistance and alternative planning. In this sense, Venice is not only a city sinking in its crises, but it is also a living terrain of possibility. Numerous grassroots initiatives are actively fighting to reclaim the city as an inhabitable, democratic, and sustainable space. Neighborhood committees, such as *Comitato Grandi Navi* (Big Ships Committee) and *Poveglia per Tutti* (Poveglia for all) have recently achieved concrete victories, demonstrating a proactive civic engagement in reclaiming public spaces and envisioning participatory governance models. Professor Federica Cavallo (2016) argued that these grassroots mobilizations not only challenge the dominant corporatist paradigm but also hold transformative potential for re-thinking the Venetian urban space, reclaiming common goods, and imagining a sustainable future for the city.

These initiatives go beyond mere resistance: they actively construct alternatives, foster debate and propose new ways of actively inhabiting the city. They hold the potential for a radical transition, one that reintegrates ecology, care, and democratic participation in the urban project.

Venice, once cannibal, may become a space of regeneration through collective participation, solidarity, and community cooperation.

2.4 Re-thinking Venice to Rethink the Paradigm

In the light of the deep contradictions highlighted in the previous chapters, an urgent need is evident: not only to analyze the mechanisms through which capitalism cannibalizes its own conditions of existence, but also to imagine alternative solutions. If Venice represents such an emblematic case of systemic crisis, it can also offer valuable insights for a radical rethinking of the current paradigm.

It is within this tension between decay and possibility that the present chapter situates, aiming to gather and value some of the transformative forces already present in the city. From the experience of the *Ri-Pensare Venezia* (Re-thinking Venice) project to a re-signification of the very notion of 'specialty' attributed to the city, the goal is to outline a vision of radical change which, far from proposing abstract utopias, emerges from situated practices and concrete collective imaginaries.

To re-think Venice becomes not merely a theoretical exercise, but rather a political one, that transcends local boundaries and challenges our ways of inhabiting the world in the age of the Anthropocene.

2.4.1 The Research Project of *Ri-Pensare Venezia* and its Contributions

Ri-Pensare Venezia is a research project by the Gianni Pellicani Foundation which, since 2023, has served as a platform for discussion on the major issues facing the city. It ambitiously aims to redesign Venice through meetings, workshops, collective participation, open debates, and concrete proposals, creating a space of encounter between experts, scholars, stakeholders, association representatives and citizens, all invested in the future of the city (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024).

More than just a research platform, it tries to see Venice not as something fragile to be saved, but as an active subject that can take part in shaping its own future through local knowledge and active community participation. It is precisely in this reclamation that the project aligns with the one envisioned by Nancy Fraser: to recognize the centrality and active importance of those background conditions that have been systematically appropriated and depoliticized by capitalist governance, and to envision a new socio-economic system revolving around life instead of capital.

The project so far developed around two 'focuses': the first one started in November 2023 and addressed the themes of young people, social base and job market and its report is contained in the volume *Venezia come stai?* (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024); whereas the

second one, started in December 2024 and still ongoing, treated eco-welfare, urban form, culture, tourism, security and urban economy.

The results obtained from this process can be read as potential combined intersectional responses to the four systemic crises outlined by Nancy Fraser (2023): the crisis of expropriation, the crisis of social reproduction, the ecological crisis and the crisis of political power. The first one manifests through its economic monoculture overwhelmingly dependent on tourism, a sector that is surely highly productive, but which tends to siphon off more value than what is actually reinvested to sustain it in the long run (Musu 2001). Moreover, real estate speculation is directly feeding off the city's facilities that permit a stable social fabric to exist and reproduce in the first place. Against this current extractive model, *Ri-Pensare Venezia* proposes a diversified and resilient economy based on plurality, autonomy, proximity and innovation through, for instance, the reconversion of Porto Marghera into a hybrid social hub; the revival of traditional forms of craftmanship especially in the historic center; support for local enterprises and start-ups through administrative simplification and community-based economic districts; and a redistribution of tourist tax revenues towards long-term sustainable development projects around housing affordability, qualified youth employment and ecological transition. To say more, these measures could be able to foster a rebalancing of spatial relations within the Metropolitan City of Venice, re-organizing its center-periphery relations into a more equal, inclusive, and integrated system. In this view, Mestre and Marghera would become integral parts of a polycentric city, overcoming the current logics of spatial segregation and functional specialization.

The crisis of social reproduction, which is perhaps one of the most evident and urgent, manifests under the pressure of mass tourism, demographic decline, and tourist gentrification, which render the city increasingly uninhabitable (Salerno 2018). There is a need to reclaim the right to remain in the city, to access services, to inhabit it. *Ri-Pensare Venezia* addresses this urgency through, to name a few, the rehabilitation of public housing and the creation of student residences and policies aimed at strengthening public welfare and healthcare. Such measures, combined with a strategic diversification of the job market, should trigger a process of repopulation that would gradually bring back stable residents to the city, reweaving the currently eroded social fabric.

Together with the social crisis, the ecological one has made the city of Venice an infamous example worldwide. Departing from the technocratic model that has historically characterized intervention in the lagoon, *Ri-Pensare Venezia* promotes an ecological vision grounded in cohabitation, climate justice and ecological repair rather than domination; through doubling the urban green cover, the de-sealing cemented zones, and the creation of community-based climate

shelters. The vision reframes environmental issues as collective, political challenges. Rather than addressing the environmental crisis as a technical, single-issue problem, these proposals call for combined structural changes in land use, mobility, energy, and governance.

Finally, the crisis of governance and democratic legitimacy is also addressed. Over decades, decisions affecting Venice have increasingly been delegated to opaque, non-democratic bodies, from private consortia managing the MOSE (Giupponi 2022) to corporate philosophy managing heritage and culture. In contrast, *Ri-Pensare Venezia* calls for a redefinition of Venice's 'special status' as a tool for public intervention; the creation of new institutional spaces of co-decision between public actors, civil society and local communities; a participatory approach to urban planning based on shared governance and active involvement of residents; and enhanced transparency and accountability in all infrastructure projects. These ideas aim at reconnecting institutions to the city's inhabitants, re-legitimizing public action and improving public trust.

These four axes converge in a broader attempt to imagine a way of inhabiting the city that resists commodification, cultivates community, and restores the damaged ecosystem while building a cooperative and symbiotic relationship with the lagoon environment. In Fraser's terms, these proposals respond directly to those "boundary struggles" produced by capitalism's inherent contradictions, seeking to reclaim its background conditions – the environment, social reproduction, public power and the urban space – as central political terrains, and to reframe them as sites of collective regeneration rather than exploitable resources for value extraction.

2.4.2 Re-thinking the 'Specialty' of the City of Venice as a Virtuous Example for Today's World Challenges

Ri-Pensare Venezia was born in conjunction with the fifty years anniversary of the enactment of the Special Law. The notion of Venice's *specialità*, or 'special status', was enshrined for the first time with the 1973 Special Law (L. 171/1973 *Interventi per la Salvaguardia di Venezia*). This status was conceived as a legal and financial framework to recognize and protect the city's extraordinary historical, architectural and ecological value and heritage. It was meant to ensure that the state would provide Venice with adequate resources to maintain its built heritage, preserve the lagoon ecosystem and sustain the habitability of the city as a matter of national interest.

Despite the benefits obtained in the first decades, over time the original promise of this special status has lost its consistency. Established as a tool for long-term public investment has been gradually transformed into a mechanism for market liberalization

and technocratic control. After years of underfunding and political marginalization, the Special Law has been proven ineffective in addressing the complexity of the city's contemporary crises (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024). In its place, a regime of centralized, vertical power has emerged, in which key urban decisions are taken by special commissioners, national agencies, or private consortia, at the expense of transparency and public accountability (Borelli, Busacca 2020).

This process mirrors what Nancy Fraser (2023) identifies as the crisis of public power: the progressive weakening of democratic institutions and their colonization by capital logics. The failure of the Comitatone – the interministerial committee meant to coordinate interventions in the lagoon – the opaque management of infrastructure projects like the MOSE, and the incapacity to regulate tourism flows or real estate speculation all testify to this profound mismatch between institutional form and urban need (Fondazione Gianni Pellicani 2024).

It is precisely against this backdrop that *Ri-Pensare Venezia* proposes a radical reframing of the city's specialità. Rather than abandoning the concept altogether, the project seeks to reclaim and re-politicize it, transforming it from a legal anomaly into a political prototype. The idea is not to restore a past version of governance, but to imagine new institutional forms that can grant greater autonomy in managing housing, public space, ecological restoration, transport and culture. More than a mere matter of legal changes, the project calls for democratic innovation: it entails the creation of new participatory structures, the inclusion of civil society and local communities in planning processes and decision-making, including the development of multi-level governance. This way, the sharing of social capital in a context of power horizontality, allows for cooperation instead of control and imposition from above, fostering participation and higher utility (Borelli, Busacca 2020).

Re-signifying specialty also requires rethinking the epistemic and symbolic status of Venice itself. In the current global imagination, the city is too often reduced to a site of loss and romantic decadence, of sinking, disappearance and death. But such imagery, while powerful, risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. Against this, *Ri-Pensare Venezia* suggests a different narrative: one in which Venice is not a static postcard but a living space, a critical city with the potential of confronting the contradictions of the present. In this reframing, the city becomes a prototype to be studied, a matter of global significance.

If the city can reclaim its power to act, to decide, to generate, it may offer one of the clearest examples of how urban life might not merely resist but find ways to flourish in a time of planetary crisis. In this sense, Venice's specialty lies not in its fragility, but in its intrinsic potential – often disregarded and underestimated – to become a model of post-capitalist reconstruction in the age of anthropogenic cannibal capitalism.

2.5 Final Remarks

The case of Venice reveals the full extent of the capital's cannibalistic logic described by Nancy Fraser: a logic that extracts value from care work and social reproduction, from the natural environment, from democratic institutions and from the public space altogether. The city's gradual transformation into a theme park, with its tourism monoculture, its constant and vertiginous demographic decline, its infrastructural violence, and its political centralization, are not just negative coincidences: they are effective outcomes of a social model that subordinates life to capital accumulation.

Yet, within this dramatic scenario of erosion, beads of resistance persist. Initiatives such as *Ri-Pensare Venezia*, multiple grassroots movements or cooperative and self-governing practices represent not only rejections of neoliberal governance, but also the active construction of alternative imaginaries. These popular initiatives do not simply react, they design new social relations based on proximity, autonomy, care, participation, and community. They give political meaning to the act of remaining in the city and re-thinking it.

Nevertheless, we find ourselves at a critical crossroads. On the one hand, these bottom-up political experiences demonstrate the potential to reclaim the city and reorganize its structures around the life of its inhabitants rather than profit. On the other, they face the persistent risk of co-optation, of being marginalized, neutralized and phagocyted by the hegemonic capitalism they resist to. As such, Venice may be read as both a cautionary tale and a generative, almost heroic example: it shows the dangers of unchecked neoliberal practice, but also the potential sites of a new sustainable paradigm.

This essay does not claim to offer definitive answers, but to contribute to an urgent collective reflection. If Venice is effectively sinking, perhaps it is not only under the rising waters, but under the weight of a paradigm that draws surplus from people and nature, to later dispose of them. Rethinking Venice, then, means rethinking the entire dominant paradigm, and imagining a city and a world in which life, rather than accumulation of capital, stands at the center.

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3 Spaces, Interaction Regimes, and the Social Infrastructures of Everyday Life
Pathways to Liveability and the Urban Countertrend of Santa Marta, Venice

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Summary 3.1 Introduction. – 3.2 Venice's Urban Exodus: A Historically Situated Phenomenon. – 3.3 Notes on the Research. – 3.4 Episodes of Everyday Life in Santa Marta. – 3.5 Rituals, Space, and Social Infrastructures: A Virtuous Circle Against Disembedding. – 3.6 Final Remarks

È inutile stabilire se Zenobia sia da classificare
tra le città felici o tra quelle infelici.
Non è in queste due specie che ha senso
dividere le città, ma in altre due:
quelle che continuano attraverso gli anni
e le mutazioni a dare la loro forma ai desideri
e quelle in cui i desideri o riescono a cancellare
la città o ne sono cancellati.
(Italo Calvino, *Le città invisibili*,
ed. Mondadori 2009)

3.1 Introduction

This research began with a simple yet revealing observation. While navigating data from *Inside Airbnb,* a project collecting and aggregating all sorts of information on the presence and impact of

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the famous rental platform on communities, it is hardly surprising that the whole Municipality of Venice is constellated by tourist rental options, with a marked majority on the main Island. The data from OCIO – Osservatorio Civico sulla Casa e la Residenza (Bonzanino, Camporese, Vianello 2023) speak for themselves: as of September 2023, the city counted 49,639 tourist beds – outnumbering its 49,304 residents. This outcome is not accidental, but the product of a long historical trajectory shaped by successive socio-spatial dynamics. The disproportion between residents and tourists is a concrete symbol of overtourism, signalling housing disruption, which in turn has its roots and consequences in an alarming depopulation of the city and the reduction of its socio-economic fabric to a tourist monoculture. However, in a city that has been so transformed and redefined by touristic consumption, exemplified by the preponderant presence of short-term listings, the data from *Inside Airbnb* reveal a notable countertrend, situated on the South-Western fringe of the main island: the Santa Marta neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood's low presence in the Airbnb dataset, particularly striking in contrast to nearby zones in Dorsoduro, and even to smaller islands of the Lagoon and with the mainland, prompted a delicate question: what socio-spatial conditions must be in place for an area to remain largely untouched by the pressures of touristification? In a city where Airbnb listings have become indicators of a deeper structural shift, marked by a rentier economy of housing commodification and socio-demographic erosion, how can a single neighbourhood be characterised by such relative absence? These questions guided a theoretical and ethnographic inquiry into the social reality constructed and reproduced in Santa Marta, asking what sets it apart from the rest of Venice.

The following chapters will unfold the findings and interpretations of the fieldwork, consisting of direct observation of everyday rituals of the various urban populations experiencing Santa Marta, to provide an answer for these questions. Drawing from the extensive work of Somma and Zanardi, the first section will focus on the historical background of the city, which has been shaped by two opposing socio-spatial forces since the twentieth century: the monumental city, curated for the growing 'foreigner industry', and the overlooked popular neighbourhoods, marked by poor housing, low hygiene, and diseases of despair. In particular, it will be stressed how the urban exodus, jointly with the progressive withdrawal of the Public from housing and spatial issues starting from the 1970s, contributed to the present-day situation in the city, allowing for the uncontrolled expansion of touristic infrastructures at the expense of public spaces, vital for the community. The second chapter will be devoted to the presentation and discussion of the theoretical framework and the methodology that guided the research: here, evolving concepts like

flânerie and the practice of 'wandering' of the *Stalker* group will prove necessary to examine an urban space in ways detached from the functional purposes which I am already used to experience. As it will be illustrated, these practices were necessary to examine the rituals of the people in the neighbourhood, fundamental for the construction and reproduction of the social reality in that inherently interactional and re-negotiated: insights from Durkheim, Goffman, and Collins' emotional energy are precious sources in this regard. The results of the observations were then distilled into five main episodes of the everyday life of Santa Marta, presented like ethnographic written vignettes and supported by photographic material in the third chapter. The findings, explicitly presented as spatially situated rituals, will be the core of the last section, focusing on their discussion. Drawing from Klienenberg (2018) and Barbera's (2024) overlapping conceptualisations of social infrastructure, and Star's (1999) classic formulation of the three main elements of infrastructures – embeddedness, transparency, reach or scope – it will be argued that the answer to the questions is to be found precisely in the abundance and diversity of social infrastructures present in Santa Marta. By anchoring urban populations in situated rituals and collective routines, these infrastructures remain embedded in the neighbourhood's social reality and foster a durable 'ethics of togetherness' (Barbera 2024, 354) sustaining civic life. They are central to urban liveability not only for supporting everyday needs, but because they mediate belonging and recognition: for these reasons they are acting as a buffer against touristification by promoting resistance through continuity, adaptation, and collective maintenance.

3.2 Venice's Urban Exodus: A Historically Situated Phenomenon

3.2.1 Peculiarity or Polarisation?

Understanding a social phenomenon requires its attentive analysis, and analysing means in turn to take into consideration all the dimensions the phenomenon in question acts upon and is acted upon. The basic premise on which this work rests is that the city is not simply a spatial container, where causal networks of populations and situations take turns in an equally casual way. On the contrary, the city, the urban space, is the setting and at the same time the heart of a concrete combination of social connections, where both strong and weak ties exist, and social institutions, within which power and information flow (Granovetter 1973). A first step into its understanding is to acknowledge that the phenomena thus occurring

are historically situated and rooted in time: the historical context is precisely the point of departure of this dissertation.

Venice has been the object of many arguments about its uniqueness and peculiarity: the city is "as precious as it is difficult in its singular relationship with water and land, clearly representing a countertrend in that it is 'naturally' pedestrian and car-free" (Settis 2024, para. 38). This rhetoric has been the alibi for many policies and actions that have made the city what it is today through the centuries, encouraging a thriving touristic sector; at the same time, it has been the justification for the political inaction (Busacca 2024) and the lack of effective mitigating solutions characterising the present scenario. However, to understand the current look of the city, pointing out Venice's oddity alone is neither sufficient nor satisfactory, and risks trivialising the underlying dynamics.

It is necessary to draw from a further past, before the advent of overtourism, and look for the long-term tendencies that have dismantled the poli-functionality and the heterogeneity of the city (Zanardi 2020) to show how the much-trumpeted 'peculiarity' is not an insurmountable obstacle for the city in itself. If anything, what was really peculiar is the crafty and long-standing process of re-functionalization of the urban space according to specific utilitarian logics, which started from the nineteenth century. Put differently, the succession of events which has brought Venice to be intended – and thus *planned* – first as a home for luxury residential and representative palaces, and then as a cutting-edge touristic destination, or, as Lord Byron describes it in 1818, "the pleasant place of all festivity/The revel of the earth, the masque of Italy" (Byron [1818] 2008, Canto IV).

Either way, between the lights and shadows which have characterised the city, one crucial thing is revealed: since then, Venice has been shaped by two opposing socio-spatial forces. On the one hand, the monumental city, curated for the growing 'foreigner industry'; on the other, the overlooked popular neighbourhoods, marked by poor housing, low hygiene, and diseases of despair. And thus, a long-term analysis cannot start but from the acknowledgment that 'the drawing room of Europe', an expression which came to define Saint Mark Square for its beauty attracting an elite of intellectuals and travellers from all over Europe, coexisted for a long time with "filthy, dark, decaying, unhealthy houses and hovels where so many poor people immiserate, without bread, without air and without light" (Somma 2024).

3.2.2 The Exodus from the 19th Century to the Present Day

In briefly reconstructing the socio-spatial dynamics that have affected Venice from the nineteenth century up until today, I will draw from Zanardi's terminology by using 'exodus' as a key term (Zanardi

2020) to indicate the action that many people took – or were forced to take – at the turn of the last century. The exodus was twofold: while in an initial phase, before the construction of the industrial pole of Porto Marghera, it was a "movement between sestieri" (Zanardi 2020, 82), from the central areas of the island to the more marginal ones, with the development of Venice on the mainland it became a "movement between districts" (Zanardi 2020, 82). In both cases, however, it is worth noting that "the working classes constituted a pawn to be repositioned in the chessboard of the urban areas, so that they would not be an obstacle to the property development and reconversion operations of the historic city" (Zanardi 2020, 58).

The reconversion that the city authorities longed so ardently was necessary for the modernisation of the city. In an initial phase, it was believed that the latter could be obtained through a massive industrialisation of the island: marked by the construction of the railway bridge between 1842-46 and by the establishment of a maritime station in 1880, the city was subject to a nineteenth-century-style urban reform, where each area had to have its precise function. This led to a first relocation of the lower classes to the margins of the island: the "large-scale social compartmentalisation of urban space" (Zanardi 2020, 29), paved the way for the construction of entire working-class neighbourhoods that coincided precisely with the peripheries of the island. The reason was twofold: on the one hand, they were transferred to be closer to their working places, leaving the central areas for the upper-middle classes, and on the other, as a matter of decorum, a recurrent element in the story of the exodus. After all, "the workers' houses do not add to the artistic appearance of the city and would offend the aesthetic sense if they were seen lined up in front of the beautiful St. Mark's Basin" (Zanardi 2020, 30).

Tourism, in this phase, did not constitute an impactful element for the modernisation of Venice: from the mid-nineteenth century, despite the reconversion of some buildings into hotels and pensions, the entrepreneurial bourgeoisie did not consider tourism a cutting-edge investment, given its uncertain and seasonal nature. Nevertheless, tourism brought the first investment and profits with the large-scale spread of indoor bathing, in tune with the contemporary European success of balneotherapy (Zanardi 2020).

It was only with the revolutionary founding of Porto Marghera in 1917 that modernisation could openly advance on both fronts and in two different geographical areas: the mainland, for port-industrial development, and the island, the historic centre, to be displaced and freed from poverty and decay, so that tourism could find fertile ground. In this context, as observed by Somma (2024, 122), "alongside the tightening of measures for the repression of begging […] a project for the transformation of the entire social structure of the city took shape, the cornerstone of which was the sorting out of

the inhabitants and their relocation in the urban space". Inhabitants were sorted out in that poverty, misery, and disease were rampant in working-class neighbourhoods, and the authorities feared that this might have ruined the city's interests: in fact, as stated by Count Foscari, "(Venice) must remain a limpid gem set in a golden circle. Therefore, we must displace (the Poor) out of immediate material and moral necessity" (Zanardi 2020, 53).

The expression 'human reclamation' (Zanardi 2020, 42) fits this scenario perfectly: in view of a collaborative and synergetic union of two Venices, the industrial one and the touristic one, united for modernisation, there was no room for crowds of beggars in the latter. Even the institutions that were set to provide help and assistance intervened to fill the demands of industrialists or the middle classes. The Social Housing Institute, instead of filling the dramatic need for adequate housing instead of dilapidated hovels, explicitly redistributed the inhabitants by selecting acceptable groups and re-directing them in different parts of the city (Somma 2024). This happened on the basis of both their suitability to be employed when needed and of their capability of living up to the price required in the specific areas.

The reclamation did not stop even after the First World War, when, after the first but brief mass exodus from the island, building renovations gave a new boost to the real estate income of both geographic poles: this was made possible by getting rid of the hovels and immiserated homes of the poor, that threatened the value of hotels and guesthouses all around.

During the fascist era, we encounter what really was the consolidation of the touristic industry: by acting directly on the ideology, memory, and feelings of the people, Venice became a 'city-image' (Zanardi 2020, 66) where enhanced traditions and rites were the driving force and the object of a touristic fruition of the urban space. All of this paved the way for the development of the "spectacular and mythological machine of Venice" (Zanardi 2020, 66). At the same time, authorities wanted to proceed with the redevelopment of the historic city, this time by displacing people across the newly built bridge, a direct link to the mainland. The idea spread that, also thanks to the new fascist infrastructure, those who found work in Marghera could also take up residence there, and this would have facilitated the "epuration and moralisation" (Somma 2024, 144) of the city from the "human encrustations that undermine its tourist, cultural and representative function" (Zanardi 2020, 71). The declared goal behind these initiatives was that of facilitating a "natural adjustment of inhabitants to the income value of individual city areas" (Somma 2024, 149): the working-class people who still could live on the island had to move to the margins, closer to their artisanal activities, so that the upper-middle classes would have

consequently moved in the central areas, closer to the representative and public administration offices where they were employed.

The above-mentioned process of 'natural' re-location of different income classes will be the *fil rouge* connecting all subsequent years. After WW2, the main objective was the economic recovery of the city. What better way to achieve this than to focus public and private efforts on the already galloping tourism sector? The consequence of this spontaneism, of seeking quick solutions to the city's serious problems was an "often irreparable anarchy of private initiative" (Zanardi 2020, 42). On the one hand, the latter branched out in the continuation of the displacement of the historic city, combined with a hypertrophic building of the peripheral areas on the mainland, and on the other, in the encouragement of touristic development.

The exodus is further enhanced by the end of the sixties, due to the further accentuation of the functional differentiation of urban areas: the fact that industrial activities have been expelled from the island adds to the fact that the island's economy is increasingly tertiarised to meet the growing demand for tourism. Zanardi (2020, 83) notes how, due to what has been called "the policy of exodus", namely eviction, renovation of the accommodation and its conversion to tertiary use, the city lost the 4,16% of the total availability of houses in a ten years' span of time (1961-71).

3.2.2.1 From Mass Tourism to Overtourism, and the House as an Exchange-Value

The two decades from the 1970s to the 1990s have seen the establishment of a legislative framework whose result has been the transformation of the housing issue, until then a social question managed by the public administration, into a private matter in which speculation could take hold.

The forerunner of this phenomenon was the 1973 Special Law (L. 171/1973 *Interventi per la Salvaguardia di Venezia*). Leaving aside the bureaucratic and administrative complexity that this law brought, the most fundamental aspect was that, while nominally aiming at safeguarding the city, it effectively codified a withdrawal of public responsibility from the housing sector. In other words, with this normative basis, private speculation in the building and residential sector took hold: evictions spurred and the renovation of houses for touristic use increased even more.

The promulgation of the 1973 Special Law (L. 171/1973 *Interventi per la Salvaguardia di Venezia*) is part of a national trend which, in those very same years, witnessed the end of housing and land regulation policies contemporary to the speculative boom (Gainsforth 2025). It has been observed, however, how the lack of public policies was, in

reality, a deliberate choice – one that supports the financialization of the economy by driving up property values (Gainsforth 2025): this legislative framework of the state's abandonment of direct intervention on the housing issue, then, falls perfectly in line with the rise of neoliberalism.

What is more, the normative basis adopted by the city can be considered the cornerstone of a deeper phenomenon, acting on and influencing the socio-spatial dynamics in a more overarching way than just normatively. I am referring, that is, to the formalisation of the transition from mass tourism to that of contemporary overtourism, of which Venice is the highest expression (Salerno 2020). Mass tourism, according to the International Encyclopaedia of Human Geography, is a "type of tourism characterized by the consumption of inauthentic spectacles and staged productions for the benefit of tourists, isolating them from local culture and creating a tourist bubble environment" (Edensor 2009). It is the form of tourism that emerged between the two World Wars and developed at its maximum capacity after the Second World War: the key term in its definition is 'consumption'. With mass tourism and its implications, even the notion of 'tourist' changed accordingly: with a higher availability of allocations, prices fell, seasonality expanded, and the tourist went from being a mere commuter to a sojourner (Zanardi 2020), spending their money on hotels, guided tours, cultural heritage, food, and all that could be commodified.

The urban de-regulamentation of which the 1973 Special Law (L. 171/1973 *Interventi per la Salvaguardia di Venezia*) is an epitome, by effectively releasing the municipality from overseeing the housing system, was a first step towards the further disruption of this scenario, up until the arrival of overtourism. This latter "refers to the phenomenon of excessive tourism that creates human, environmental, and social challenges" (Chaney, Séraphin 2023). It is different from its previous form in that it damages the social, ecological, economic strata of the city of destination. Under this form of tourism, the fact that the house went from being a primary commodity to a bargaining value for the shrewdest investors was consolidated. How was that possible?

To answer this question, it is appropriate to draw on the theory of value expressed by Marx in the third volume of his *Capital*. Times have evolved, and several online platforms now facilitate the purposes of private owners, "consolidating a subsistence system based on passive land rent" (Zanardi 2020, 180). In Marxian terms, what we observe is not merely a shift in housing practices, but the intensification of a rentier economy, where income is generated not through productive labour but through the monopolisation of the urban space. As Marx noted, rent arises from the exclusive control of land and property, allowing the owner to appropriate value produced elsewhere in the social body (Marx 1894). In other words, through the renting out of

private properties – in recent times rendered even easier thanks to the digital infrastructures under 'platform capitalism' (Srnicek 2017) – landlords no longer need to engage in any productive activity; surplus is extracted by simply offering access to an asset they already control.

This process found fertile ground in a city already emptied by the weakening of public policies and decades of demographic declines – a vacuum that would soon be filled by the tidal wave of global tourism. The perfect storm emerged when a depopulated urban core met the rising demands of late-capitalist travel economies. These latter filled the void, but in doing so, reinforced it: the more the city became dependent on tourism, the less space remained for the residents, the more opportunities for rent for those who owned the properties appeared.

Today, the exodus is unstoppable: the house, and specifically its conversion of use, are still the main driving force of this phenomenon, reinforcing societal division between those who own properties and those who are displaced by its speculative refunctioning. In Marxian terms, residential properties are not use-values anymore, centres of dwelling and social reproduction, but have become exchange-values, namely assets that, owned by a few, are now mobilised for profit. The island of Venice has thus officially become the tourist district of a large conurbation (Somma 1993).

3.2.2.2 In the Heart of the Matter

I frame my research question starting precisely from the online renting platforms characterising this phase of capitalist economy. In particular, the question stems from a simple observation, which started from the available data on the undisputed leader of them all: Airbnb.

As shown in figure 1, retrieved from the *Inside Airbnb* project – a mission driven initiative providing data and advocacy on Airbnb's impact on residential communities – the island of Venice is punctuated by listings. At first glance, this is unsurprising.

The site dwells deeper into the data about the specific characteristics of the allocations: out of the 8,163 total listings as of December 7th, 2024, 76% is constituted by entire homes and apartments. The impact of such high percentage of entire allocations available for mostly short-term rentals, i.e., 99.2% of all the bookings according to the data (Inside Airbnb 2024), is self-evident: despite the original purpose behind the creation of the platform, namely that of home-sharing, a system that implies the renting out of a space while the owner or resident is still there (Gallagher 2017), in the current situation the whole apartment is left to the short-term renter. This jeopardises the relationship between the resident and their house: as Zanardi notes, short-renting out property units to tourists has assumed unprecedented ubiquity and importance in the city (Zanardi 2020). This practice is stressed to the point that "a kind of ethical taboo has even developed with regard to those who exercise it, especially among small landlords and historical residents" (Zanardi 2020). Because it is seen as a pushing out factor, and it is the most invasive opponent of urban residency, Zanardi (2020) adds, "it is not uncommon for landlords to feel called upon to make a moral decision, where they choose and claim to rent to Venetians instead of tourists".

Moreover, the site provides a comprehensive map of Airbnb presence for the whole Venice-Mestre area, including the islands of Murano, Burano, Sant'Erasmo, Lido, and Pellestrina in the Lagoon, and Marghera, Favaro Veneto, Tessera, Zelarino and Chirignago on the mainland. All of the abovementioned contain a variably high density of Airbnb allocations: even the most remote islands, that might be considered less-favoured among the tourists given their distance from the places of interest and the consequent time needed for commuting – let alone the price of the transportation itself – contain various short-term rental opportunities.

Let us take Burano Island as an example. Burano is a 0,2108 km^2 piece of land located in the North-Eastern Venetian Lagoon, counting 2,195 residents as of June 2022 and internationally known and appreciated for its brightly coloured homes, the lace work, and the folklore built around them. To reach the island, it takes approximately from one to one and a half hours, taking Venice railway station

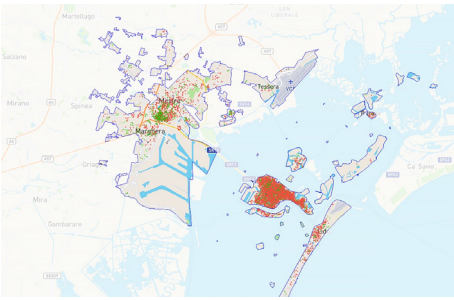

Figure 1
Beatrice Gervasi, 2025.
View of the presence of Airbnb allocations in the Municipality of Venice, 2024. Source: Inside Airbnb

stop as point of reference, and, given the connection in the midway island Murano, a total of two waterbuses must be taken. Given these premises, it is hard to imagine the presence of short-term rent options there, or that tourists might decide to stay there for visiting Venice and bear the burden of cost and time for commuting: however, according to *Inside Airbnb* (2024), Burano counts 33 listings, 86% of which are entire homes and apartments. And this is not the only case where Airbnb for touristic purposes is spread in such unusual areas: Pellestrina, even further from the main island than Burano, counts 10 listings and 100% private houses and apartments, and Murano, despite its relatively limited area of 1,17 km^2 accounts for 81 listings. Several allocations are also widespread one or more bus rides away from the island of Venice, in the mainland: the latter accounts for the 20.4% of total listings, namely 1,664 out of 8,163. The neighbourhood of Chirignago alone, part of the municipality Chirignago-Zelarino, one of the furthest from the main island as shown in the *Inside Airbnb* (2024) analysis, has 21 listings, but less than Favaro Veneto in the North-East mainland Venice area, accounting for 50 listings. In Marghera, the southern extension of Mestre, a town articulated in a residential neighbourhood and a trading harbour with an important industrial park, so-called Airbnb entrepreneurs have nevertheless found room for 160 listings.

The above-mentioned examples show the ubiquitous presence of short-term rental options in the Venice-Mestre municipality, in various degrees and with diversified densities, and do so by taking into account only those listings that are present on the Airbnb platform. The significant presence of touristic allocations would exponentially grow should we consider apartments and rooms available by other means or the wide availability of hostels and hotels. But that is not all: even when extending outside of the Venice-Mestre municipality, in the administrative area of the Metropolitan City of Venice stretching dozen kilometres inwards from the coast, a fast check for listings on

Figure 2 Beatrice Gervasi, 2025. View of the presence of Airbnb allocations on the main Island of Venice, 2024. Source: Inside Airbnb

the Airbnb platform, and a look at the reviews from the guests, soon confirm that the offer meets the demand of tourists visiting Venice, who are thus willing to spend their nights so far from the island itself. As a consequence, even in the small to medium urban centres and the rural areas around Venice, such as Cavallino-Treporti, Jesolo, San Donà di Piave, Portogruaro, and many others, there is a pulling factor for the overnight stay of tourists.

At a closer look of the map in figure 2, however, it is impossible not to notice how a small yet defined area in the South-West border of Venice lays mostly untouched by the carpet of red dots signalling the heavy presence of Airbnb allocations. An urban space on the very island of Venice with so little presence of short-term rental options, namely roughly twenty listings, should catch any viewer's attention, especially when considering the above-highlighted substantial presence of the listings further from the heart of the historic centre.

The space in question is the Santa Marta neighbourhood in the district of Dorsoduro. Santa Marta, as described on the website of the Municipality of Venice (2019) "occupies the western end of the city, where ancient settlements have been replaced by working-class neighbourhoods and industrial buildings constructed between the nineteenth and twentieth century". Over time, many of these structures have been converted into university facilities, making the area "a true university citadel".[1]

How come, then, that an urban space *on the main island,* whose entirety is otherwise so heavily absorbed by touristic allocations, can be so devoid of touristic allocations? While being free of the massive presence of short-term rentals, have tourism infrastructures absorbed economic heterogeneity in the neighbourhood?

1 Comune di Venezia (2019) *Santa Marta*. Available at: `https://www.comune.venezia.it/it/content/santa-marta-0`.

The dissertation aims to explore these questions by examining the socio-spatial dynamics of the neighbourhood, seeking to understand the factors that have allowed Santa Marta to avoid the pressures of touristification that have reshaped much of Venice, and that are here exemplified by the presence of Airbnb allocations.

3.3 Notes on the Research

In the previous chapter I focused on the urban exodus that Venice has been facing since the nineteenth century, and which shows no sign of stopping. I argued that this socio-spatial phenomenon is today reiterated by an increasingly high number of homes left empty for the historical vicissitudes of the urban fabric. On the other hand, it is paired with a more profound social change declined within a capitalist rentier economy (Harvey 2010), where the house becomes a value-exchange asset in the hands of a few. This phenomenon is in turn exacerbated by the advent of digital rental platforms, facilitating the process of urban displacement. However, in a city where the presence of Airbnb is predominant and stretches beyond the insular borders, one exception emerges: the Santa Marta neighbourhood. My research question concerns the understanding of the phenomena that make it possible for the neighbourhood to resist the presence of short-term rentals, and of the reasons why touristic infrastructures do not penetrate the socio-urban fabric. Before getting into the heart of the research by presenting the data, I shall dedicate this chapter on a few essential points as far as the theoretical framework and methodology adopted are concerned.

One thing I feel I must anticipate is that the choice of this research topic is inevitably influenced by my belonging to the urban landscape of Santa Marta. I moved to the neighbourhood almost three years ago, for study reasons, leaving the Friulian countryside that saw me born and raised for the previous years. One of the first impressions I had on Santa Marta that I still remember very vividly is the immediate thought that came to my mind while I was still dragging my suitcases under the blazing sun of that September morning: "This is *not* Venice". Even years before I approached an awareness, albeit partial, of its dynamics, the neighbourhood seemed somehow special to me, as it had absolutely nothing to do with the polished postcards of the most renowned monuments, or the horde of people queuing to visit them that I instantly pictured in my mind when thinking about the city.

Today, I cannot claim that my positionality corresponds to that of an insider: I have had first-hand experience of the urban space and its dynamics from before starting to collect data, but I was also aware since the beginning that the neighbourhood would have been a transitional space for me. However, I am not a complete outsider,

either: my experience cannot be totally reduced to the utilitarian purpose for which I approached Santa Marta in the first place.

It is the liminal space in which my relation towards the neighbourhood is located that primarily influenced the theoretical lenses and the methodology I adopted. The following section will explore the first element, according to which I chose to focus on the observation of rituals as epitomes of the socio-spatial dynamics of the neighbourhood. The subsequent one will then draw from the concept of *flânerie* to illustrate the methodology used.

3.3.1 Theoretical Framework

As anticipated, in an attempt to analyse the socio-spatial dynamics of the Santa Marta neighbourhood, I have chosen to focus on the role of rituals. Émile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912] (2008), famously described rituals as "rules of conduct which prescribe how a man should comport himself in the presence of sacred things". For Durkheim, religion provided the most visible and traditional expression of a deeper social mechanism: the collective enactment of meaning through symbolic action. Rituals, he argued, are the vehicles through which individuals are bound into a "moral community" (Durkheim [1912] 2008) not simply by belief, but through shared emotional experiences that generate cohesion and a sense of collective identity. According to the French sociologist, the proximity of the actors and their reciprocal action are the foundational conditions of rituals (Benvenga 2024): these generate collective consciousness, an instrument exercising influence over the conduct and thinking of individuals. This is, overall, an experience that is capable of generating and maintaining an order: the psycho-social boundary, neatly separating those who partake in the ritual from the outsiders, is here interpreted as a moral force.

While Durkheim's analysis centred on religious life, his insights have since been extended by anthropologists and social theorists to encompass a broader range of everyday, secular practices. One of the first and most significant sociologists who were able to apply the Durkheimian emotional potentialities of rituals on everyday practices, or "profane rites" (Goffman 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 5), was Erving Goffman. According to the American sociologist, a certain form of adherence to the established norms did not only emerge in official or religious ceremonies but governed all interactions in the everyday life, guiding individuals' expressiveness (Benvenga 2024).

In other words, with the intention of providing "a version in modern dress of Durkheim's social psychology" (Goffman 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 5) Goffman extends the traditional theory of rituals to the behaviours of secular individuals in contemporary

society. The core of these behaviours, according to this view, is a 'just' representation of the Self: the rituals thus identified are the rules of 'face games' – ritualised performances of the Self in social life, namely interactions where participants' mutual respect and dignity are at stake, and where all parties tacitly agree to uphold this respect to avoid 'losing face' (Benvenga 2024). Therefore, the Self "is a dramaturgical effect emerging from a scene being performed" (Goffman 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 6). Among contemporary interpretations, Randall Collins offers the most directly relevant framework for this dissertation. One of its merits is that of having provided the macrostructures of societies with micro-interactive foundations that integrate individuals into networks or communities with shared values (Henry 2001). Let us explore this concept further. According to Collins, rituals mediate between the micro- and macro-social dimension through the emotional and symbolic solidarity deriving from them. This interpretation bridges the Durkheimian emotional and symbolic experience with the materialistic and rational model offered by Goffman. Individuals are connected by a certain degree of reciprocal obligation, and through their shared experience and sense of belonging towards a 'sacralised' symbol they can reproduce what Collins named Emotional Energy (Benvenga 2024). The latter may also serve as an instrument of group control, not far from the moral force identified in Durkheim's work, through which the group may identify on the one hand, and protect on the other, by excluding those whose subjectivities conflict with the dominant moral standards. Moreover, Emotional Energy establishes the fact that, for Collins, social action is emotional rather than instrumental. He identified four main fundamental characteristic defining a ritual, from which many other conditions emerge: the first one is the necessity for at least two people to be close to one another, to "exert a reciprocal bodily influence" (Benvenga 2024, 9); then, a clear definition of the situation is needed in order to clearly distinguish members from non-members; the third aspect is the presence of and the focus on a common activity or object, becoming 'sacralised'; finally, the emotional intensity of the action. Emotional and symbolic exchanges are at the core of another concept developed by Collins, namely that of the "theory of chains of ritual interactions" (Collins 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 10). According to this theory, social interactions – of which rituals are the foundations – function as 'conversational markets' where individuals seek not material goods but emotional and symbolic rewards. These exchanges involve diverse 'cultural currencies' and the pursuit of emotional resonance: for this reason, successful rituals generate emotional energy that solidifies group bonds and ignite flows of emotional alignment that may sustain social cohesion.

These three theoretical approaches to rituals are fundamental because, despite their similarities and differences, they offer a clear

and most contemporary framework for addressing this socio-spatial analysis. I argue that these theories can be summarised and united by establishing that, in its broadest sense, a ritual is a practice that takes place in a public dimension and creates norms crucial to the existence of a community, transcending the individual. Ways of being and of living are conveyed in day-to-day interactions by virtue of the very existence of interaction, which ties the members and activates social and psychological mechanisms related to a sense of belonging, at least temporarily, to one and the same context. I believe that these characteristics render the observations of rituals suitable for the investigation of the Santa Marta neighbourhood: if it is true that, as Zanardi (2020, 207) observed, Venice's spatiality is characterised by "a tightly knit fabric, where people tend to identify and recognise themselves in their own district and even more intensively in the sub-neighbourhood area where they were born or live", rituals thus framed truly are precious resources for a broad understanding of certain social mechanisms that characterise this particular neighbourhood and distinguish it from the others.

In conclusion, this framework was chosen in an attempt to uncover the underlying causes for Santa Marta's exceptional character – namely, the features that make it a countertrend with respect to the rest of Venice – starting from the neighbourhood's everyday social reality. The latter, since it is upheld and stabilised by routinisation (Berger, Luckmann 1966), is constructed through the continuous interactions and negotiations among individuals. As a result, the construction of social reality necessarily unfolds to a large extent through rituals, interactional and structuring by definition. Their analysis is therefore fundamental to understanding the reasons why touristic infrastructures do not penetrate the neighbourhood's socio-spatial fabric.

3.3.2 Methodology

The most insightful – and yet intuitive – way to explore rituals and everyday interactions in the neighbourhood proved to be that of direct observation. Before outlining the theoretical influences that shaped my observational approach, a brief clarification regarding the spatial boundaries of the research is in order. In fact, although Santa Marta has a well-defined administrative parameter, I chose not to restrict my investigation to it. The observation extended to adjacent and functionally connected spaces that are regularly frequented by the residents and users of Santa Marta – areas which, while not formally within its boundaries, are nonetheless experienced and recognised by the urban populations as integral to their daily life.

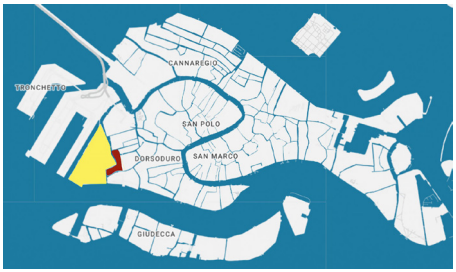

Figure 3
Beatrice Gervasi, 2025.
View of the area where the research was conducted. The yellow filled area indicates the full administrative area of Santa Marta, while the red marks the area outside of the administrative boundaries within which data collection also took place

As anticipated, I have been living in the neighbourhood for almost three years. This prolonged residence has meant that my movements through the space have typically followed familiar, goal-oriented routines – walking through the surroundings according to functional needs and daily rhythms. However, for the purposes of this research, I deliberately sought to estrange myself from this habitual mode of navigation. In an attempt to subvert the instrumental relationship I had developed with the urban landscape, I embraced its opposite: direct observation was to be carried out without temporal or spatial limits, without specific aims, detached from the established codes of my spatial cataloguing.

3.3.2.1 Variations on Flânerie

"Time that is lost is space that is gained": since its creation in the 1990s, this has been the motto of the urban lab *Stalker* by the architects Francesco Careri and Lorenzo Romito (Cocco 2018). The project, an interdisciplinary 'nomadic observatory', in Careri's words, has always aimed at analysing the city in stark contrast to urban functionalism, where order and utilisation prevail, tending instead towards an authentic experience of the urban fabric. In other words, at making the city an action and not an object (Cocco 2018). Although the work of the collective has always focused more on peripheries and connected marginality, therefore not inherent to the object of the research, a fundamental lesson can be drawn from this, serving as a starting point of data collection: walking is a transformative practice of a space and its meaning (Careri 2006). It is through the act of walking that a space becomes a place, and it was necessary for the purposes of this work to walk through *this* place, the Santa Marta neighbourhood, to understand aspects where, for how familiar, it was unknown. This was obtained through roaming the neighbourhood – *andare a zonzo* – or "wasting time wandering aimlessly" (Careri 2006).

The above-mentioned is none other than the preeminent action of the *flaneur*. The latter, a leading figure of the nineteenth century,

found its origin in a bourgeois Paris, and was popularised by poets such as Baudelaire, but was also a key inspiration for artistic movements starting from Dada (Careri 2006). Sociologist Giampaolo Nuvolati has explored the figure of the *flaneur* in several works: he defines it as an "urban animal par excellence" (Nuvolati 2013, 2), reflecting the individual's longing for a form of wandering freedom, constrained by the pressures of mass consumer culture and societal expectations, in an effort to reclaim a more thoughtful, intentional rhythm of life. Through walking, he engages with the city not merely as a physical space but as a field of interpretation, reading its surfaces and movements in an attempt to access its perceived authenticity – its "*genius loci*" (Nuvolati 2013, 1). However, for the purposes of this research, a distinction is in order: alongside the *dandy*, bourgeois, bored *flaneur*, in search of an individual and aesthetic experience – albeit with an intention of rebellion and breaking away from society – is another type of 'doing' *flânerie*, which finds its roots in the artistic movements that emerged in those same years. I am referring, that is, to the Lettrists and Situationists movements, whose *flânerie* is epitomised by Guy Debord's concept of "psychogeographic drift" (Careri 2006, 76). The purpose of the drifts to which the situationists were committed to was to waste 'useful' time by transforming it into "constructive playtime" (Careri 2006, 77): in other words, participants were to be guided through the surrounding by their subjective feelings and experiences, without a predetermined route, to unveil the "unconscious areas of the city" (Careri 2006, 77). However, seeking pleasure and adventure was not the only aim: although the perception of the Urban strongly recalls the subjectivity of the *flaneur* (Nuvolati 2013), their work was ideologically driven, in that it aimed at showing how a city can be collectively experienced in a detached way from the false conviction that urban circulation is strictly and solely related to the functionalization and division of spaces for production. Thus, from *flânerie* as an individual, aesthetic investigation of the places, Situationists get to another dimension, the re-appropriation of a place through walking, which also calls into question the other actors present in an area, if not the entire community (Nuvolati 2013). The practice of 'walking in an estranged key', drawing from the experience of the *flaneur* now altered by its critique to urban functionalism, would have been embraced by many movements, starting from the Situationists and up to the *Stalker*s (Nuvolati 2013, 106).

At the heart of this analysis lies an attempt to engage in direct observation by roaming the neighbourhood. Here, walking is neither a purely aesthetic or intellectual pursuit, nor a utilitarian act aimed at reaching a destination or completing a task. Rather, it is approached as a playful time and a constructive discovery. Put differently, field notes were collected at the intersection of the concept of *flânerie*,

its evolution into the Situationist *dérive*, and the established tools of ethnographic research – anchored in the awareness that walking is not just a means of locomotion but can itself serve as a method of inquiry.

3.3.2.2 Data Collection and Analytical Process

Data collection took place intermittently between February and May 2025, with the intent of capturing a nuanced picture of Santa Marta's socio-spatial dynamics across different seasonal and daily rhythms. This temporal span allowed me to observe part winter and part spring, and to attend to the ways in which daily life unfolds across various time slots – morning, afternoon, and evening.

Observation was carried out in two distinct ways: the majority of the data was collected through walks specifically organised for this purpose, following the insights outlined above. However, close attention was paid to the urban space during my regular, day-to-day traversals of the area, and some data derives from these instances as well. After each observation, at the end of the walk, my considerations were recorded in a digital document, using notes taken on my phone while in the field to assist me. At times, I opted for recording my immediate thoughts and observations as voice memos in place of phone notes: I would later listen back to these recordings and, when relevant, incorporate them into my written fieldnotes. When possible, the fieldnotes were further enriched by photographs taken *in situ*, with the aim of preserving a more vivid sense of atmosphere and spatial configuration to support later stages of reflection and analysis. Overall, I tried to keep my field notes organised according to emerging thematic strands, based on recurring elements such as specific places, repeated actions, or notable interactions. It was precisely the identification of a correspondence – a certain pattern – between repeated behaviours and spatial settings that began to guide the subsequent phase of analysis.

The interpretative and conceptual framework for data analysis was not fully predetermined at the outset. Rather, it took shape progressively through extensive desk research conducted alongside fieldwork. Initially, I engaged with literature on the core topic of the research, namely neighbourhood vitality and socio-spatial dynamics to ground my observations. As new empirical material emerged from the field – whether through patterns noticed in routines, spatial practices, or social interactions – I expanded the desk research to include correlated or intersecting themes. This recursive movement between fieldwork and theory allowed the conceptual tools to evolve in response to the material itself: this process was facilitated by the thematic threads that emerged during data collection on the

one hand, and by my own embeddedness in the social life of the neighbourhood, which I believe provided an additional layer of interpretative depth, on the other.

3.4 Episodes of Everyday Life in Santa Marta

This chapter presents the findings of the fieldwork carried out in the neighbourhood of Santa Marta. As previously anticipated, data were progressively organised into thematic threads during the research process. These threads emerged through the temporal recurrence of specific actions, spatial elements, or patterns of interaction among different urban actors, and were developed using a combination of written fieldnotes and photographs, some of which are included here to visually support the presentation of the material. Over time, these thematic threads were distilled into five main 'episodes' – recurring moments of everyday life in the neighbourhood that involve consistent types of social actors and spatial practices. These episodes will be presented here and will serve as the starting point of the analysis that will be provided in the following chapter, where I argue that these practices function as epitomes of the construction and reproduction of everyday social life in Santa Marta. This is because they represent both socially shared routines and ritualised uses of space, and as such, offer a lens through which to understand the socio-spatial dynamics that characterise the neighbourhood.

3.4.1 L'Aperitivo: Inside Informal Evening Gatherings

Every weekday, from around five in the afternoon until seven or even later, Fondamenta de l'Arzere gradually fills up. Groups of people move along the waterfront, peeling off here and there to stop at what seems to be *their* usual spot. This stretch – running from the border with San Sebastiano all the way to the wooden bridge that marks the edge of Santa Marta – is lined with bars, bistros, and a handful of restaurants. And as the light softens, the place comes alive. Students spill out from their last classes, construction workers still in dusty overalls drift in from nearby sites, other workers in a jacket and tie. But some arrive on purpose and do not just pass by: older residents make their way slowly toward the bar on the corner by the Santa Marta bridge, sometimes in pairs, sometimes with a caregiver.

An older woman and a younger companion sit on a low wall surrounding a planter in front of a bar, adjacent to the one on the corner. With them are two small chihuahuas, perched on laps and being gently stroked. The dogs become a point of attraction, especially for two young girls pulling their glittery scooters behind

Figures 4-5
Beatrice Gervasi, 2025. View of Fondamenta de l'Arzere during *aperitivo*. April 15th, 6:21 pm

them and holding their father's hand. Still wearing their backpacks after school, the girls ask to pet the tiny dogs. Their father allows it: he has just run into some friends at the bar opposite and takes the opportunity to enjoy a spritz, an ever-present, almost foundational symbol of this time and place.

From the opposite direction, another child arrives holding his grandmother's hand. His attention, however, is captured by a football being kicked between a group of students playing in a circle, their backpacks and cardboard models piled against the bar wall. Their movements, so coordinated that they manage to juggle a ball with one leg while holding a spritz on the other hand, almost resemble a choreographed dance, punctuated by laughter and shouting. Others prefer a more static *aperitivo*, seated at tables or resting on the low planter walls – couples, small groups, or larger circles of friends. Sometimes, a member of one of the groups wanders off in search of an extra chair: "Mind if I take it?" A nod. "Thanks". And the *aperitivo* can begin for all.

Music comes from some of the bars – clear enough to set a mood, soft enough to talk over. Those standing, without a table or waiting for their friends to finish their game, move rhythmically to the beat, always keeping an eye on the bowl of chips. It seems almost expected to run into someone you know, and greeting nods explode: an old classmate, a colleague, a neighbour, a flatmate's friend, and even the bartender.

And then, gradually, people start to move again. Some head home: "see you tomorrow!". Others gather their jackets, pick up their bags, and walk a little farther along the Fondamenta to a bistro known for its live music and more socialising, which sometimes even local associations choose as a focal point for their meetings and events. It seems the natural next step of the evening gathering.

3.4.2 Mondays at the Farmer's Market

Unlike the tidy, horizontal row of stalls along Calle Longhi, the crowd gathering for the Monday farmer's market in Santa Marta seems far less orderly. Some stand patiently in line, holding their ticket number, while others wander toward the stalls that spill over into nearby Calle dei Bagni Baghei and all the way to Campiello Longhi.

Their gestures, conversations, and ways of being in the space make it clear that not all live the same kind of life – and not all come from the neighbourhood. A large portion are students from the nearby residence: backpacks on shoulders, mostly in pairs or trios, chatting as they decide what to buy. The market trip seems to become a moment to plan their week's meals: some already talk about a lunch together, eager to try recipes with the last seasonal bunches of black cabbage they just bought. At the busiest stall, though, most customers are elderly, each with their colourful shopping trolley pulled up beside them and their number ticket in hand. Waiting is softened by casual conversation:

"Luckily the rain stopped",
"It is my granddaughter's birthday – after this I will stop by the flower stand",
"My wife could not make it today, so she instructed me. Hope I do not mess this up!".

The laughs that follow seem part of the sentence, too.

Not everyone passes the time so easily. A young boy, hand-in-hand with his aunt, sighs, asking how much longer they have to wait: "kids" states an older woman smiling, entertained by the show. After picking up some greens and eggs, they head toward the *imbarcadero,* the waterbus stop at Santa Marta. When the boat arrives, they board and disappear into the stream of people coming and going. The stop is never busier than on Monday mornings.

The waterbus is not the only way people arrive: from the main street of Santa Marta, an older man in a tracksuit tells the baker that he has done his daily workout. The farmer's market location makes it accessible for vendors, too: vans pull in, allowing workers to constantly swap out empty crates with fresh product. Still, what defines the morning is slow life: people take their time choosing; they ask for advice on how to cook this or that vegetable; some return to tell the vendor how last week's tip turned out. At the busiest stall, a regular customer is gifted with a small bundle of herbs. A woman arranges to meet a friend later for coffee, while two students wave at G., an older man known by some in the neighbourhood for his kitchen garden and his cheerful stories. One woman, in running gear, joins the queue where a friend has held her spot: no one seems in a rush,

Figure 6 Beatrice Gervasi, 2025.
View of the area of Santa Marta's farmer's market on a Monday morning. May 5th, 9:18 am

even though it is Monday morning. After picking up their vegetables, bread, eggs, meat, or cheese, some linger by the flower stall: "When should I plant these?". This is just one of the examples showing how the exchange is continuous, animated, and personal. Some vendors know exactly what to set aside for their regulars, before they even ask.

This space reaches the ears before the eyes: dialectal chatter, laughter, the knock of crates, the beep of the cash register, the bark of an impatient dog chasing a pigeon while its owner lingers in conversation. Only when the last of the colourful trolleys has turned the corner do vendors begin to dismantle the stands and boxes are stacked back into the vans. Until next Monday, that is.

3.4.3 A Saturday Morning

In front of the Santa Marta student residence, a small fruit and vegetable stand sets up a few days every week. Right across from it stands the neighbourhood's newsstand and tobacco shop. On Saturday mornings, within this short stretch of street, the sequence of actions seems almost choreographed for some people: buying the daily newspaper, exchanging a few comments with the shop owner about the front-page headlines – when time allows for it – and then joining the line at the stall. Some are shopping because "my daughter and the grandchildren are coming over for lunch tomorrow", others because they simply do not feel like walking all the way to the supermarket.

Yet not everyone is there for the stall: some have come out to have breakfast at the café just a few steps away. This creates a scene that is almost comical in its clear contrast: at the blue and yellow tables outside, younger people sip their cappuccinos and eat brioches, while older residents drink an *ombra* together, a local term for 'glass of wine'. All of this happens simultaneously, at the same hour. Small dogs dart around the tables, chasing each other and drawing laughter from the people seated nearby. Sometimes, the dogs' exuberance

becomes a medium and the pretext of a conversation between these two apparently so distant groups.

On the other side of the café, there is a small playground, where a few children play on the slide and jump, while parents watch from nearby benches. Others supervise from a bit farther away, keeping an eye on them while sipping coffee. The playground extends into a basketball court, where the two hoops seem to divide the space naturally: young boys on one side, older ones – among which, students – on the other, tossing the ball in turn and running after it, hardly acknowledging the group with whom they share the court.

Some prefer to just observe. Three teenage girls walk through the neighbourhood with music playing from their phones, sometimes mimicking a viral dance, sometimes passing a ball back and forth between them.

3.4.4 At Lunchtime: Breaktime for Students (and Workers)

At either end of a ping pong table, two students are in the middle of a match. Around them, a group of onlookers comment on the game with loud voices and jokes. Their backpacks are dropped to the ground, beside a tree; plastic containers with homemade lunches are held in their hands. This ping pong table sits between the entrance of one of the Santa Marta student residence buildings and the outdoor sitting area of the latter's restaurant. This presence is marked by the presence of tables, umbrellas, and people eating from full plates, but also from the bright sign that reads: "*Food affinity space: come here to eat, study, work!*". The restaurant, in fact, like the inner park of the residence, is open to the public. It is no surprise, then, that the place comes alive at lunchtime.

Four members of the coast guard, just down the street, stroll up slowly in their uniforms, stopping to look at the daily menu before sitting down and exchanging a few words with one of the waiters. Nearby, a long table is packed with students who, having just finished an exam, are now celebrating. Not everyone, though, appears so cheerful: two others, each with a sandwich in front of them, are completely absorbed in their laptops, seemingly unfazed by the noise from the ordering queue and the music speakers. Some men and women, dressed formally, eat quickly in order to leave the table to an elderly woman, who arrives with her dog and now sits quietly enjoying her coffee and reading the newspaper. A construction worker recommends a dish to his colleague recalling the same thing he ordered on a previous visit and is about to have again. The first signs of spring are in the air, and indeed, some take the opportunity to lie on a blanket in the grass after lunch. A wide variety of people seem to populate this shared space at lunchtime. Some form a circle

and start tossing a ball around, and it does not take long before the circle grows: others join in, including those who had been waiting too long for their turn at ping pong.

The constant flow of people, also due to the fact that the lawn is a transit area between the three gates of the residence, and thus three different areas of the neighbourhood, makes this a particularly dynamic spot. It is easy to lose sight of friends if you linger too long while ordering, as demonstrated by the disoriented look of a boy holding a tray, spinning around in place, unaware that his four friends are waving and shouting to him from the other side of the sitting area, laughing.

3.4.5 A Birthday and a Graduation: The Exceptional in the Ordinary

This paragraph, rather than offering a snapshot of everyday life, is meant to serve as a brief testimonial note on a specific trend I observed in the neighbourhood. I am referring, that is, to the private use of a public space – or, more precisely, the extension of a private event into the public realm. In Santa Marta this can be witnessed with some regularity. Let us take, for instance, two spaces that have already been introduced earlier–the bar and the playground in front of it.

On a Wednesday afternoon, two celebrations unfold simultaneously and just a few meters apart. Both mark important milestones, making them *exceptional* events. And yet, they take place on the main street of the neighbourhood, a distinctly *ordinary* location. On one side, in the playground, colourful balloons occasionally obscure a group of children wearing a paper party hat. They play on every piece of equipment, and from time to time, prompted by the parents, they burst into a cheerful '*Tanti auguri*', each with their own rhythm and pace, producing a result that is amusing at best for the adults nearby. The parents, in between chatting and handing out snacks, keep busy cleaning up trash or scolding the more fearless children. Their voices, however, blend with another chorus nearby: "*Dottore, dottore!*": the guests at a graduation party at the bar, prosecco glasses in hand, have stood up to sing for the graduate. His parents, also in attendance, remain seated, perhaps slightly embarrassed, but their admiration shines through the photos they are taking of the scene.

Every now and then, the sound of confetti cannons from one group seems to mingle with the pop of a balloon burst by a child in the other, tying together two celebrations in the very heart of the neighbourhood.

3.5 Rituals, Space, and Social Infrastructures: A Virtuous Circle Against Disembedding

In the previous chapter I presented the findings of the fieldwork, namely the results of my direct observation of everyday practices characterising the neighbourhood. The episodes are dense with people, spaces, actions, and elements whose meaning for the construction and vitality of the social life of the neighbourhood, and thus possible reasons for its presumed difference compared to the rest of Venice, will now be unfolded.

First, I will attempt to link the actions – that will be presented as rituals – and the subjects undertaking them to some well-defined urban spaces, to show the tight relation between the two. This connection will serve as a starting point for introducing the concept of social infrastructures into the discussion: it will be maintained how these latter influence the way in which people interact, and, in doing so, sustain the socio-spatial vitality neighbourhood. Building on this analysis, I will explore how the presence and reproduction of social infrastructures may be linked to the presence of heterogeneity and vitality I observed in Santa Marta, and to the absence of touristic infrastructures, and how these elements interact with each other creating a virtuous circle. Finally, I will reflect on how and why these social infrastructures have been preserved or re-created in the neighbourhood, attempting to offer a possible explanation for its resistance to the dynamics of overtourism.

3.5.1 The Space of the Ritual, the Ritual in the Space

The series of episodes described above, while consisting of seemingly ordinary actions, revealed a deeper patterned quality. These are not isolated or casual actions, they are recurring practices – either daily, weekly, or occasional – embedded in the temporal and social rhythms of the neighbourhood's life. In other words, they are everyday rituals, which, as anticipated, amount to a repetition of acts that contribute to shaping both social relations and a shared sense of place. This emerges clearly upon analysis of the data: all the five episodes I described contained roughly all the elements of rituals as conceptualised earlier. These patterns of behaviour take place in the public sphere, are interactional, and do seem to create norms which transcend the individual experience.

Let us take the farmer's market as an example, a public event par excellence: quite a few ritualised behaviours can be found there – right from the beginning. The most trivial of these behaviours is the simple action of taking the number ticket and waiting in line for your turn at the stall: I have described how everyone performs this

action, and it is also visible in the photographic support. Now, imagine what would have been like had someone not known this fact – which has become an established and reproduced norm – and just ordered their vegetables, surpassing all the other clients queuing. Someone would have surely reproached them, and the newcomer would have just gone back to their place in the queue. That would have just been the moral force at work, in Durkheimian terms, repairing what has been misled by who failed the ritual, someone who 'lost face', in Goffmanian terms. In other words, even queuing with the ticket number is ritualised and it is a participated experience to maintain a certain order – here, in the most literal of terms. The chats softening the waiting for some elderly people is also part of the ritual: it is the most relational side of this, and it is enabled by a common objective, i.e., buying food, and repetition. The dialogues I heard and partially reported also convey emotional and symbolic exchanges: platitudes and small talk are intertwined with personal questions and follow-up conversations, and all of these elements hint to a collective and shared universe. And so, at the farmer's market, one might find that Collin's 'theory of chains of ritual interactions' (Collins 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 10) applies: people do not just go there to buy goods; for many, it is an occasion of interaction, a pretext to exchange a few words with the people they always see and meet there, with whom they have created a specific symbolic universe. Possibly, this leads to the generation and channelling of emotional energy, which solidifies the group ties, and reinforces the ritual.

This is just one example showing how the episodes observed contain a variety of ritualised patterns, grounded in tacitly shared norms that regulate the behaviours and account for the creation of a social reality. The people wandering from table to table during *aperitivo* and asking for an available chair, students gathering around the ping pong table and waiting for their turn to play at lunchtime, the small talk hovering above the bar on a Saturday morning, and even the division of the basketball court among different teams' players, are all signs and symptoms of a way of living in the neighbourhood that is well-defined and continuously adapted both by and to the people who inhabit, traverse, or make use of it in different ways. Just like in the 'profane rites' (Goffman 1988, as cited in Benvenga 2024, 5) conceptualised by Goffman, in these everyday actions the mutual respect and dignity is at stake, and silently, perhaps even unconsciously, everyone upholds the social reality thus established, by playing their role in every context. Again, it would not be seen favourably were someone to come at your table and take a chair without that preamble, just as it would be unkind not to exchange greetings with the elderly you meet every week at the bar and who talks to you about their grandchildren, and even popping up at the basketball court and occupy both nets would be awkward if you are

alone and it is your first time in Santa Marta. These interactions not only maintain a shared moral order, but also produce a locally intelligible grammar of behaviour, a way of knowing what is expected, accepted, or might be disapproved of.

Having established that the episodes observed consist in rituals, another important consideration is due: these patterns of behaviours are not abstract, but unfold in, and are shaped by, specific urban spaces. Indeed, looking at the data, the first thing that becomes clear is how all the actions taking place in the situations above described are spatially situated: the bar, the playground, the court, the garden, and so on. This observation, for how obvious it may be, is actually a fundamental step in the continuation of this analysis: since people live in places, their everyday activities and well-being are strongly influenced by the spatial configuration of their surroundings. Zanardi has noticed how, especially in Venice, the urban space is not simply one destined to transit: it is a full-fledged *place*, dense with social interactions (Zanardi 2020). Take for example the *aperitivo* I described in the last chapter, and the dad stopping to join two friends while walking home with the two daughters: what was probably meant to be a commute back home, became an occasion for social interaction for many other subjects around. This episode alone allows for at least two other considerations as far as spaces and rituals are concerned. The first one regards the polyfunctionality of the site: the most disparate people experience it in the most disparate ways. The pictures show it quite clearly: Fondamenta de L'Arz-ere, at its intersection with the Santa Marta bridge, widens and, besides functioning as a stallage for a bar, leaves a spatial void that during such gatherings gets filled with diverse purposes. Someone is sitting, someone is standing, someone is simply transiting, someone is playing football in a circle: one thing that all of these actions have in common, however different, is that they entail a certain degree of contact and social interaction.

The above leads to the second consideration, concerning the types of people acting in the space: the rituals are characterised by heterogeneity of urban populations and their ages, and, even if interactions tend to be confined within the same group, leaking between them is not uncommon. I have said it since the beginning: Santa Marta, historically a working-class area, has now become a university citadel through the reconversion of many former industrial buildings to academic and residence use. Therefore, it is not uncommon to witness a space that is experienced by residents and students; what is more, given its proximity to various offices and even the headquarters of Coast Guard, workers' presence is registered in significant numbers. The variety of urban populations, each with its own times and ways of experiencing Santa Marta, translates into an urban space that is constantly renegotiated and re-adapted to its users (Zanardi 2020). There, encounters are imbued

with authenticity, as they are often unexpected or spontaneous: the dad at the *aperitivo* epitomises this tendency, similarly to the people meeting at the farmer's market or at the bar. This strengthens community bonds and a sense of belonging.

Data offer yet another consideration as far as the urban space, its use and the emotional symbolism they convey are concerned: I am referring to the private sphere leaking into the public one, as exemplified by the last episode of the previous chapter. The child's birthday party is an event which is private at its core – an intimacy which is extended only to the closest friends and relatives of the children, as it is usually expected with invitations. However, it is not happening within the domestic walls, nor in a house lawn: it takes place in a public playground, right in front of another personal celebration – a graduation party – occurring in the bar opposite to the park. Not only the two events are not privately carried out: they share parts of the very same public space, to the point where the observer, a passer-by, can see it, and where the voices of both distinct groups are intertwined, and so are their celebrative chants. The effect that is conveyed is nothing like what could be usually witnessed in other cities or different neighbourhoods very often. However, the extension of a private event into an ordinary public space is typical of working-class neighbourhoods like Santa Marta, where historically houses were so unsanitary that activities and functions were mainly carried out in the *calle*, where people preferred to spend more time (Zanardi 2020). In fact, Mancuso (2009, as cited in Zanardi 2020, 206) noted how, between the private and the public, there is a "profound integration that is not found in any other city, where people undertake activities and functions – and share social events – that would elsewhere be confined to the domestic walls". In other words, urban public spaces become an important setting for the displaying of social relations and rituals.

The reason why these ritualised behaviours and activities take place in specific locations is that the latter provide material and symbolic scaffolding for the practices occurring there. At the same time, as it has been noted, these places are continuously re-signified by the multiple actors succeeding one another. The consequence of this is a dynamic interplay between the ritual and the space: if the space makes the ritual possible on the one hand, the ritual gives meaning to the space on the other.

3.5.2 Social infrastructures: the Vitality and Potential of "Third Places"

What has been discussed and analysed in the previous paragraphs are what Oldenburg (1999) defined as 'third places'. The latter refers to all the places that are experienced by people outside of their home

and workplace, respectively the first and second places, and which are frequented voluntarily during one's free time. This expression is the precursor of what Klinenberg (2018) then conceptualised as social infrastructures, namely "physical places and organisations that shape the way people interact", which help their users to build trust and enhance social ties. I argue that these infrastructures constellate the socio-spatial reality of Santa Marta and ultimately correspond to the physical places in which the observed ritualised interactions occur – with significant consequences.

As above mentioned, a foundational element of social infrastructures is that they correspond to an interaction regime (Barbera 2024): in fact, data show a consistent number of interactions in all the five episodes. These latter were casual and unexpected among acquaintances, like during the *aperitivo* in a frankly crowded environment; they were planned, like the lunchtime or the basketball game; sometimes, they were situational among relative strangers, as the case of the ping pong game or the small talk at the farmer's market convey. The level of acquaintance and the strength of ties within a network does not alter the existence of a place as a social infrastructure: on the contrary, one of the qualities of the latter is precisely that of presenting means and characteristics able to amplify the relations between people as they are sites in which "strangers can meet and mix with others with whom they share their neighbourhoods and cities" (Latham, Layton 2019, 2). What is more, social infrastructures encourage people towards an interaction across differences: in the case of this neighbourhood, these are directly limited to age, gender, and urban population of belonging. Let us take the episode of the Saturday morning as an example: the setting of the bar in which two distinct groups of people were gathering allowed for the presence of multiple and different people. In particular, due to the nature of that place, i.e., a bar, social connection can happen in two ways: it can be a gathering place where people actively plan to meet on the one hand, or, being its stallage located in a transit area, it can be a 'bumping place' (Banwell, Kingham 2023, 4) on the other, namely an area where casual encounters unfold during one's daily routine. These fulfil an important social role, while having a functional nature – the bar and farmer's market have a commercial function, the park and basketball court are conceived for leisure and sport activity, and so on – namely that of providing meaning and significance to social interactions, for how casual the encounter may be. The kinds of relations thus constituted in third and bumping places are weak ties: in a daily context, acknowledging and seeing people you share a neighbourhood with, despite differences, and even if the encounter brings about low contact and low emotional intensity, can still provide positive effects (Banwell, Kingham 2023). Among these, the fact of adding contacts among different contexts

in the same environment, as well as enhancing a certain feeling of belonging, or as famously put by Granovetter (1973), enabling the diffusion of knowledge and information among community members.

Going back to the example of a Saturday morning in Santa Marta, this can be seen quite clearly: from the comments exchanged over the front-page headlines to the nods of greetings at the newspaper shop or queuing at the vegetable stand; from the parents' socialising and small talk while supervising the children playing to the passers-by smiling and weaving. All these micro-interactions are not emotionally invested, and yet are the glue of the social reality created and reproduced in Santa Marta. This is because people are used to that, as it is an everyday ritualised behaviour and it is carried out in places which, for their spatial affording and a physical arrangement, further favour this kind of relations. As anticipated, the bar offers a good framework for observing the mixing of groups: in that case, the dog running between the tables offers the pretext for these groups, i.e., the elderly drinking an *ombra* and the young people having breakfast, to interact. It also offers the occasion to highlight the considerable co-presence of pets in social infrastructures of the neighbourhood: from this scenario to the *aperitivo* one, and even at the farmer's market, as the photographic support shows. Much has been said about the presence of dogs in public spaces: they are a mark of distinction for some owners – here, they are all accompanied by elderly women – and, because they need to be walked daily, they make an intensive use of shared spaces (Tissot 2011). Dogs favour "engagements among the unacquainted" (Goffman 1963, as cited in Tissot 2011, 276) because they have automatically visible and self-evident positive effects on human relations, especially for similar people living in a neighbourhood consisting of a tight-knit fabric. In other words, as social catalysts and signs of domestic rootedness, dogs subtly indicate a well-used and emotionally invested urban structure: dog walkers' routine walking patterns frequently lead to chance encounters with others in bumping places like the bar.

3.5.2.1 Embeddedness through Symbolic Universes and Everyday Learning

In all the examples provided in the previous chapter, the 'social' element stands out much earlier than the fact that these spaces are actually infrastructures. From this, a question might emerge: how can we be sure, apart from long-standing observation, that what is being witnessed is an interaction happening within an infrastructure and not just a situational and contextual exchange? This question amounts to asking what makes an infrastructure–here declined as a social one–such.

Social infrastructures, just like spaces, are not fixed entities, nor merely material: they are relational and practiced (Latham, Layton 2019). From this notion, at least three characteristics of the infrastructures can be derived: they are embedded, transparent, and have reach or scope (Latham, Layton 2019). Santa Marta's farmer's market offers a good example to test these three characteristics. First of all, it is embedded: it unfolds within pre-existing networks and relationships, here epitomised by a specific supply chain, commercial relations between sellers and clients, arrangements on the allocations of the stalls, and so on. It is transparent, in that people frequenting the farmer's market have interiorised its functioning, and do not rearrange it every week, i.e., they do not need to re-establish a ticket for the queue, and the actions they carry out are almost taken for granted. Finally, and obviously, the market has reach and scope: this is shown by the fact that it can be repeatedly used weekly, and because it offers a heterogeneous array of products – as well as casual interactions. Santa Marta's farmer market is just one example of social infrastructure properly said: roughly all episodes are useful to highlight aspects of it.

As far as reach and scope are concerned, let us think about the birthday and graduation parties, or the use of the basketball court: these are examples of how public space accommodates multiple and overlapping rituals without formal coordination. Yet another concept can be drawn and applied to this: 'heterarchies' (Stark 2009, as cited in Barbera 2024, 354), namely the capacity of a system to host multiple evaluative principles simultaneously. This is connected to the reach and scope of infrastructures as noted before, highlighting how the same physical location supports different uses, rhythms, and urban populations – often at the same time. There is no apparent top-down control over who uses what space or when, yet the outcome is orderly, cooperative, and rich in vitality.

In the light of this multi-functioning and heterogeneity of users, one's role and behaviour within the infrastructure is learnt through participation, to the point where it becomes transparent and exhibits a certain 'taken-for-grantedness' (Star 1999, as cited in Latham, Layton 2019, 3), as examples like the queue at the farmer's market or at the restaurant at lunchtime illustrate. Even the different nets to use at the basketball court and where to sit during *aperitivo* are learned through membership to the infrastructure. In other words, it is through repeated exposure to the dynamics of the neighbourhood, to how others queue, relate, laugh, play, walk, and move, that one acquires the capacity to *properly* stay within the infrastructure, rendering the micro-rituals observed not merely social actions, but pedagogical moments for the community. The ultimate purpose of this co-learning, tacit process is a non-instrumental interaction, where emotions are shared and the same mutual meaning is conveyed

(Benvenga 2024). What is emphasised here is therefore not a material end in the interactions, but a symbolic and collectively constituted end: social infrastructures can be seen as those distinctive elements of the urban fabric that ensure the recognisability of a place while enabling the collective construction of a vivid and functional image of the environment for those who inhabit it, which serves not only to navigate it physically but also to interpret and organise it symbolically (Zanardi 2020). This characteristic is what brings some people at the farmer's market every Monday morning as part of their daily life, as much as it is what guides other people in their patterned movement from the newspaper shop to the bar on a Saturday, or what pushes parents to choose the playground as a party site: people map their social environment, both spatially and emotionally, also thanks to the face-to-face embodied interactions that happen within it, and maintain it through use and negotiation over the same spaces.

Therefore, the places observed are not neutral locations: they are socially charged environments that seem to produce an 'ethics of togetherness' (Barbera 2024, 354), where a local moral order rooted in reciprocity, recognition, and implicitly shared norms – even in the absence of a strong tie – stands. A virtuous circle emerges at the intersection between the people, carrying out everyday rituals, and the spaces, when they constitute social infrastructures: these, in turn, favour ritualised activities and interactions, resulting in visible vitality of the neighbourhood. The observation of these infrastructures, by virtue of their very characteristics, can give many insights on the well-being of the urban environment: in fact, given commercial or political activities can contribute to close down and modify particular kinds of spaces (Latham, Layton 2019), and therefore disembed social infrastructures from the networks and relations of people.

3.5.3 An Antidote to Overtourism?

What has just been described is precisely what is going on in Venice: social infrastructures rely on the heterogeneity of users, spaces, accessibility, and are responsive to the people's needs, which are satisfied through negotiations and establishment of ritualised behaviours. In other words, thanks to them being embedded in the local context, they are able to provide for their users' sociality and – albeit inadvertent – sense of place and belonging. For these reasons, they are precious indicators of the liveability of cities or neighbourhoods. The anticipated discrepancy between Santa Marta and roughly the rest of Venice lies at the core of the research question, and it is based on the alleged dis-embedment of the social infrastructures of the latter which, having lost all their foundational

characteristics, have ceased to exist as such and have disappeared, or become touristic infrastructures. The consequences of overtourism on the city, as well as the root causes which have allowed for such effects, have already been explored in the first chapter: when the progressive withdrawal of the Public on land and housing regulation met a city already devoid of residents by the long-standing exodus, a rentier economy took hold, which translated in less space for resident housing and the rise of a rampant touristic monoculture.

The Rialto Market is perhaps the most glaring example of a social infrastructure that has been lost to tourism. It is not frequented much by the few residents around, as they have been experienced an excessive touristic pressure and have retracted (Zanardi 2020). How could this happen? Two complementary causes contribute to understanding this phenomenon. As anticipated, social infrastructures are closely linked to both a functional and a symbolic end: the primary purpose of a market, be that Rialto or Santa Marta, would be that of buying goods or, as we have seen, socialising with neighbours. However, due to the centrality of Rialto, both as a transit space and as a site of interest for tourists, the ritual practice associated with the place changed, and it did so due to structural conditions over which the actors have no power. As a consequence, the residents ceased to frequent it, they started excluding themselves as they felt increasingly deprived of that infrastructure (Zanardi 2020), which in the long run became a tourist monopoly. So, the first cause of the loss and transformation of social infrastructures in this context is the exclusion – sometimes the self-exclusion – of the local urban populations. This is because the urban space is re-moulded whenever the dominant activities change and, when the touristic performance takes over, practices that do not conform to this type of configuration suddenly prove inadequate (Zanardi 2020): therefore, the residents who live in these areas stop frequenting those places, from going out to the market to the *aperitivo*, from breakfast to the evening walk, until, as it has been noted, they stop living there in the most extreme conditions.

The second cause for the loss of social infrastructures in the rest of Venice, hitting differently than in Santa Marta, is precisely a socio-demographic one. History can provide a solid background in this respect: as it has been illustrated in the first chapter, the city's social fabric has undergone many changes, albeit forced. First, the plan to industrialise Venice, making it on a par with other northern cities, through the construction and expansion of various production chains on the margins of the island, and the consequent populating of those areas by the working classes; then, after a parallel strengthening of the tourism industry in strategic locations, a progressive 'human reclamation' took hold, where the plan of creating two Venices for two different purposes – mainland for industry and island for tourism and representation – was consolidated. Progressively, for the already

mentioned political and market mechanisms, tourism grew evermore on the island, and so did its economic effect: the margins of the island got more and more populated, while the centre weakened by pulling out residents. It is therefore no surprise how, when it became rampant, tourism found more fertile ground precisely in those areas where the civic fabric got dismantled in time and had a minor effect on certain marginal neighbourhoods – like Santa Marta. I argue that, on a first level, the relative resistance of the neighbourhood to the full impact of touristification lies in the continued presence, use, and defence of diverse social infrastructures – spaces that are practiced, meaningful, and collectively maintained. On a second level, it lies on the defence by the residents, the workers, the students, and other urban populations that were able to stay there – and who could do so because that area has not historically suffered such a strong impact of depopulation. Through repeated use and informal stewardship, residents, workers, and other city users have effectively defended these infrastructures, allowing them to act as a buffer against the flattening effects of touristification. What is more, through collective maintenance by heterogeneous users, exhibiting transparency through routinised practices and sustaining relations and a wide range of activities – in Stark's terms, by ensuring heterarchies to exist – social infrastructures perpetuate their embeddedness And this can be clearly seen through observation: in a city where testimonies reveal a sense of emptiness and bitterness about the disappearance of the children playing among the *calli*, whose disappearance is felt as a great loss (Zanardi 2020), in Santa Marta they laugh and celebrate in the park, they play basketball or ride their scooter, they sing and dance in trios in the streets. And again, where the elderly exploit all sorts of shortcuts and hideaways to escape tourist fluxes during the day (Zanardi 2020), in Santa Marta they populate the *calli*, some dragging a trolley, some walking the dog, some sitting at the bar.

The above-mentioned behaviours are not casual, nor contextual: they are signs and symptoms of a relatively strong civic fabric, and in any case capable of defending the social infrastructures within which it reproduces itself. Spaces are not disembedded, de-coded, or flattened into logics of consumption: they were, are, and remain places for the people, shaped by and nurturing interactions and rituals of the everyday.

3.6 Final Remarks

What began as a simple observation gradually unfolded into an ethnographic and theoretical inquiry, culminating in an infrastructural reading of how public life and social reality are reproduced. Faced with the presence of a real urban deprivation – the

fast yet long-standing wearing away of the socio-economic fabric due to the uncontrolled expansion of a complex macro-social phenomenon such as tourism – the glaring countertrend of Santa Marta is promising. Where Airbnb presence was used to exemplify the compromised relationship between residents and their city, and thus a social reality that has been changed as its roots, the fact that Santa Marta is exempt from this, despite being a relatively small neighbourhood, has potential.

This research is not intended to ascribe special qualities to the neighbourhood, nor to prove how it is an idyllic bubble that has managed to escape the pressures of overtourism – as it would be impossible to affirm this indefinitely, given the flexible nature of tourism, which, as it has been noted, has been able to adapt through history on a par with the socio-economic conditions that sustained it. On the contrary, it ultimately argues that responding to this social challenge need not rely on exceptional measures or *ad hoc*, special policies, nor should it be dismissed as too complex or unsolvable.

The case of Santa Marta proved to be useful and telling precisely because its inverse tendency is epitomised by the presence of social infrastructures which, by etymology, are embedded in established networks and relations, and, given their foundational nature, are not exceptional. The cases taken into consideration show it quite clearly: observations revealed 'third places' (Oldenburg 1999) fulfilling commercial, recreational, and transit functions. As it was argued, behind the immediate objectives that could be met in those specific places, there was another one, underlying and shared, namely the aspiration for people to interact and be together in a non-instrumental way (Barbera 2024). This makes the concept of social infrastructure analytically powerful, as it drives beyond visible economic or demographic indicators and attends to the relational and performative foundations of urban vitality. This form of maintenance and resistance is about the reproduction of this given social reality by virtue of interactions, acknowledgments, heterogeneity of users and functions – in other words, through adaptive and sustainable heterarchies (Barbera 2024).

To conclude, one final consideration is worthy of note: as true as it is that social infrastructures are present and act as a buffer against touristification in Santa Marta, it is also true that they owe their existence, first and foremost, to a historical and socio-demographic dynamic that differs from the rest of Venice, i.e., civic fabric that had not been compromised in such an impactful way by the exodus. Rejecting a determinist view that wants to equate the presence of social infrastructure with the absence of tourism, or the *ad hoc* creation of social infrastructure to solve the problem without other social, political, and economic issues also being tackled, this thesis ultimately limits itself to saying that social infrastructures, when

present, are a good indicator of the liveability of a place. Embracing an infrastructural approach to public life broadens the conceptual lens through which we grasp the structures and intensities of urban sociality (Latham, Layton 2019). Therefore, while not being a panacea for the urban crises of our time, and although they cannot be mechanically created when all is said and done, their presence alone often signals something deeper: a form of situated and relational density that anchors liveability in the everyday. Recognising them might enable social scientists to perceive and engage with urban mechanisms through a renewed analytical lens and offer planners an entry point for thinking beyond technocratic solutions.

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4 Social Cooperatives and Tourism: Navigating Economic Sustainability and Social Reintegration in Venice

A Study on Inmates' Empowerment, Social Innovation, and Local Resistance in Venice's Tourism Economy

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Summary 4.1 Introduction. – 4.2 Social Cooperatives, Inmates and Tourism. – 4.3 Theoretical Foundations for Alternative Economics: Giddens, Polanyi, and Beyond. – 4.4 Social Cooperatives Within the Italian Penitentiary System: Structure and Challenges. – 4.5 Case Studies: Rio Terà and Il Cerchio. – 4.6 Interpreting the Findings. – 4.7 Conclusion.

4.1 Introduction

This research emerges from the meeting point of two complex realities: the growing dominance of tourism in Venice and the often invisible struggles for rehabilitation of inmates.

More specifically, it investigates how social cooperatives in Venice deal with the tensions between them. In this context, cooperatives

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represent a unique actor: they are at once businesses and social projects, rooted in the everyday life and struggle of the city and the market. Therefore, their work raises key questions about the possibility of building stable, inclusive and sustainable alternatives for their stakeholders within a system characterised by speed and profit. To answer this, the essay draws from a theoretical framework built on authors who have critically analysed the effects of capitalism on society. At the centre are Karl Polanyi's idea of embeddedness and Anthony Giddens' concept of the 'third way'. On one hand, Polanyi helps explain how the economy has become detached from society, treating land, labour and money as commodities, and how this disconnection fuels inequality and crisis. His notion of the 'double movement' which describes society's pushback against unregulated markets, is especially helpful in understanding cooperatives as forms of resistance in touristic cities like Venice. On the other hand, Giddens' 'third way' helps frame the potential of hybrid models, like cooperatives, to go beyond both state dependency and unregulated markets. His idea of positive welfare and generative politics aligns closely with the bottom-up, participatory strategies observed in the case studies. Further insights from Nussbaum, Kabeer and Granovetter enrich the analysis by focusing on capabilities, empowerment, dignity, and the relational dimension of economic activity. In this space between market and welfare, social cooperatives stand out as forms of social innovation, as they build a system where economic activity and social inclusion go hand in hand while bringing new jobs and services. This idea is captured well by Mongelli and Rullani's concept of Social Business Hybrids (SBHs): organisations that survive in the market while maintaining a strong social mission, by creating access to work, to rights, and to meaningful participation for people who are often marginalised.

The essay is structured in five chapters. The first introduces the research context, situating it at the crossroads of two current academic debates: inmate labour in social cooperatives and social innovation in tourism. It also presents the research questions, case selection, and the methodology based on qualitative interviews and document analysis. Moreover, the second chapter builds the theoretical framework to conceptualise alternative economics practices. Chapter three zooms in on the Italian prison system, exploring how work and rehabilitation are framed through laws and daily practices, with a particular focus on how this plays out in the Venetian penitentiary system. Furthermore, chapter four presents the case studies of Rio Terà dei Pensieri and Il Cerchio, illustrating their origins, governance and direct or indirect interactions with tourism. Finally, the last chapter brings everything together: it interprets the empirical findings through the lens of theory and the phenomenon of mass tourism. It shows how these cooperatives act as quiet forms

of resistance and reclaim agency through labour. To sum up, this essay hopes to show that even in a city like Venice, often reduced to a postcard, there are still spaces where different values co-exist, where people are trying to build something together for a better future.

4.2 Social Cooperatives, Inmates and Tourism

This essay is situated at the intersection of two ongoing academic debates: the role of social cooperatives in prison and the potential of social innovation in tourism. While both debates have evolved mainly separately, this research brings them into conversation by exploring how prison-based social cooperatives navigate a tourism-driven economy, specifically in the city of Venice. In doing so, it seeks to offer both theoretical and empirical insights into how these organisations balance their social mission with external market pressures, and how marginalised actors can participate in alternative forms of redemption and independence within highly commodified urban spaces.

4.2.1 Positioning the Research: Inmate Labour in Social Cooperatives and Social Innovation in Tourism

Social cooperatives have emerged as key hybrid organisations capable of reconciling economic and social goals. In Italy, Type B cooperatives – the ones that help marginalised individuals find a durable employment – exemplify this approach, offering not just mere work opportunities, but a full reintegration through care, responsibility, and personal development (Borzaga, Santuari 2001; Mongelli et al. 2018). Among all types of Type-B cooperatives, this essay will focus mainly on social cooperatives working with inmates. Empirical research confirms the social value of such initiatives, as they promote dignity, responsibility, and self-worth, with evidence suggesting a drastically lower recidivism rates among the inmates who participated in these kinds of projects (Cavotta, Rosini 2021; Materia 2017; Pamio et al. 2025). Mongelli et al. (2018) frame these rehabilitative processes as instances of 'integral human development' (IHD), where cooperatives serve to encourage the physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions of a person, supporting the full development of their workers. At the organisational level, cooperatives are also understood as social business hybrids, as they combine economic viability with a mission of inclusion (Mongelli, Rullani 2024). They create value in two ways: by involving inmates in meaningful production and economic activities ('creation enablement') and by offering them access to opportunities

and networks otherwise out of reach ('access enablement') (Mongelli, Rullani 2024). Furthermore, Pamio et al. (2025) contribute to this debate by proposing a taxonomy of jail-based cooperative models based on task creativity and training style. From the 'high creativity/ on-the-job training' model, which emphasises hands-on learning and the prisoners have considerable freedom and creativity, to the 'high creativity/ formal training' model, which combines creative activities with formal training provided before and during work. Conversely, 'low creativity/on-the-job training', the most common model, supports larger-scale, routine work with a broader number of inmates participating but with reduced flexibility, and 'low creativity/formal training' focuses on a precise and formal training before work, followed by a stable, structured production, reducing the need for constant supervision. Nevertheless, while the literature emphasises the rehabilitative potential of these cooperatives, it also acknowledges their challenges. Scholars highlight the bureaucratic barriers within prisons, cultural resistance from staff, and access restrictions that often replicate existing inequalities (Pamio et al. 2025; Mongelli et al. 2018). Moreover, prison work often differs significantly from outside-world employment. It is not uncommon for labour behind bars to be poorly paid, with limited protections and few opportunities for developing meaningful skills (Kalica 2014). Tasks tend to be repetitive and basic, offering little in terms of personal growth or future employment. Another issue is how these jobs are assigned. Rather than aiming to support the rehabilitation of the majority of inmates, the system often favours those who are already compliant and productive. In this context, labour is used less as a tool for reintegration and more as a way to manage prison life: to keep inmates occupied, reduce tensions, and maintain order, rather than truly prepare them for life after prison (Kalica 2014).

Parallel to this, the essay considered social cooperatives as forms of social innovation. In recent years, social innovation (SI) has started to gain popularity in tourism studies as a way of responding to economic and social challenges. The current academic debate on social innovation in tourism (SIT) offers useful insights. Defined as bottom-up responses to unmet social needs (Mulgan et al. 2007; Oosterlynck et al. 2019), SIT emphasises participatory, community-based alternatives to mainstream tourism models. Although the first academic papers to mention SIT appeared in 2007, it was not until 2021 that the topic reached its peak (Busacca, Tzatzadaki 2025). This shift reflects a broader change in how innovation is understood. The common technology-driven innovation models are being replaced by a more participatory, place-based and inclusive approach (Busacca, Tzatzadaki 2025; Wirth et al. 2022; Borghys et al. 2020). This shift can be described as 'democratisation of innovation', such as a process that centres users in creating innovations that respond to

real local needs (Borghys et al. 2020). Still, as both Busacca and Tzatzadaki (2025) and Wirth et al. (2022) highlight, the SIT field lacks clear definitions. The term 'social innovation' is often used without a precise theorisation, which makes it challenging to build a solid theoretical ground. In addition, much of the research tends to focus on touristic actors, overlooking the importance of non-touristic players (Wirth et al. 2022). The case studies are usually located in moderate tourist areas, despite mass tourism's effects being highly recognised (Busacca, Tzatzadaki 2025). Busacca and Tzatzadaki (2025) also note that the term 'community' itself needs a critical and precise definition. The latter is often used vaguely, masking the internal diversity and conflicts. Similarly, the debate on prison-based cooperatives remains ambiguous. Pamio et al. (2025) highlight the lack of comprehensive research on this kind of cooperatives, noting that most scholarship is limited to individual case studies. Mongelli et al. (2018) also underscore the theoretical dominance in the discussion of IHD and call for more empirical research on the practical strategies of cooperatives in the prison context.

4.2.2 The Research Question: *How Do Social Cooperatives Working with Inmates Position Themselves Within the Venetian Tourism-driven Economy?*

What emerges is a series of gaps that this essay aims to address by bridging the two contemporary active debates aforementioned. In fact, the essay makes three significant contributions through investigating how these cooperatives position themselves in the Venetian touristic setting. First, it expands the conceptual boundaries of SIT by including non-traditional actors, such as inmates and prison staff, within the landscape of tourism innovation. Second, it deepens the literature on cooperatives' hybridity by exploring how these organisations manage tensions between their social missions and the demand for visibility, efficiency, and market logics imposed by tourism. Third, it challenges the often vague use of 'community' in both fields by empirically unpacking who constitutes the cooperative's community in this scenario, how conflicting interests are negotiated, and what forms of management are enacted. Instead of focusing solely on their rehabilitative impact or internal governance, this research asks how these organisations engage with the broader economics of tourism. It explores how they adapt to, or resist, the socio-economic imperatives brought by mass tourism, and how compromises or innovations emerge in the process. Building on this expanded view, the following research question guides the entire inquiry: How do social cooperatives working with inmates position themselves within the Venetia tourism-driven economy? From here,

other sub-questions arise naturally to help illuminate the practical strategies and deeper tensions at play: How do these cooperatives manage the tension between economic stability and the slower, social nature of work inside prisons? In a city where products are judged by their appearances, how do they communicate the social meaning behind what they make? And finally, how do the different actors involved – cooperative staff, inmates, prison administration, local institutions, local citizens and even tourists – interact and influence each other in this intrigued field? From the analysis of these interactions, the essay offers a close-up view of how innovation, inclusion and dignity are translated into the cooperative's everyday practices. It adds a concrete case to the broader conversation on social enterprises, while also making space for the voices that are too often left out of debates on tourism, labour and urban change.

4.2.3 Methodology and Case Studies

To explore these dynamics in depth, the essay adopts a qualitative case study approach, grounded in semi-structured interviews enriched with document and website analysis. The research focuses on two Venetian social cooperatives: Rio Terà dei Pensieri and Il Cerchio. Both organisations operate inside and in close connection with the prison system and are actively engaged in the production of goods and services. These cases were selected firstly because they operate in the local landscape investigations, such as Venice, but also because of the many services they provide; from artisanal product making to public green area maintenance and so on. As a matter of fact, both cooperatives offer a broad view of how carceral labour can intersect with the outside world. However, given this essay's focus on the relationship between social cooperatives and tourism, particular attention was given to the retail and production of goods activities, the ones most visible to visitors and most affected by the rhythms of the touristic economy. The primary data was gathered through two interviews with a representative from each cooperative. These conversations were then contextualised by materials available on the cooperatives' websites, as well as public reports. This combination allowed to investigate not just what the cooperatives do, but also how they narrate their mission, present themselves to the public, and frame the scope of their work. Ultimately, instead of seeking generalisable conclusions, the aim is to generate rich, contextualised insights into how cooperatives perform under an exploitative mass-tourism monoculture.

4.3 Theoretical Foundations for Alternative Economics: Giddens, Polanyi, and Beyond

Debates concerning novel socio-economic frameworks have been triggered by the shortcomings of conventional economic systems, from the excessively unregulated capitalist model to the overly centralised socialist one. Social cooperatives, which combine social and economic goals to foster equality, sustainability, and community involvement, stand out among the suggested alternatives. This section examines the theoretical contributions of thinkers who managed to rethink the economic landscape to offer a basis for comprehending the possibilities of social cooperatives.

Among those who argue that a new strategy is required, Anthony Giddens stands out with his idea of a 'third way' or 'positive welfare' (Giddens 2006, 383) as a solution for the issues within capitalism and the uncertainty of socialism. In the first chapters of "Beyond *Left and Right*" (1994), Giddens introduces the term 'New Right' or 'Neoliberalism' to describe a political approach that places the capitalist market at the centre of the economic and social system, differing from traditional conservatism, which majorly focused on the conservation of the aristocracy, hierarchy, and the importance of religious institutions over the individuals (Giddens 1994, 25). Friedrich von Hayek, whom Giddens regarded as an 'universalist' (1994, 34) for opposing any government control of the market because it impedes individual liberties, is a prime example of this viewpoint. Hayek contends that pricing data is the only trustworthy indicator of how the economy is doing and that deregulation is a necessary reaction to the problems posed by globalisation (1994, 46). While this ideology has survived the pressures of globalisation, extreme deregulation of the economic apparatus has eroded social cohesiveness and sustained inequalities. In this context, Giddens points out how modern capitalism has severed the direct link between producers and consumers, leaving the coordination of economies to the interaction between prices and profits. This shift reduced human labour to a commodity to be traded on the market, raising questions about the democratic nature of a society in which resources are so inequitably distributed (1994, 57). In this regard, Karl Polanyi (1994) describes the commodification of human labour and land as a 'commodity fiction' (Polanyi 1994, 167). According to him, the market economy is "controlled, regulated, and directed by market prices". (1994, 162). Therefore, every element interacting with it, from labour to money and land, is assumed to be only regulated by supply and demand. These elements are treated as mere commodities, even though they are not inherently produced for sale. As a consequence, the economy evolved as a separate field unrelated to socio-political life, while the market became an institution itself. In fact, "A self-regulating market

demands nothing less than the institutional separation of society into an economic and a political sphere" (1994, 165).

For Polanyi, institutionalism primarily meant that economic behaviour could not be interpreted solely with an individualist lens, but social institutions intrinsically shaped it (Trigilia 2002, 97). The market's focus on profit did not emerge by accident; it was the outcome of political, cultural, and economic decisions that transformed societies from agricultural to industrial economies. An example of this process is the introduction of expensive specialised machines, which were only profitable when large goods were produced (Polanyi 1994, 120), pushing the merchant to rely on profits and overproduction. Such efforts to disembed the economy from social institutions inevitably led to the wreck of the working class's living standards, which were totally dependent on the market. This process, in turn, created many societal and environmental crises (1994, 165). For instance, commodifying land disturbs ecological stability, whereas treating labour as an exchange item diminishes human dignity and weakens community bonds. For this reason, disembedding the market can be compared to stretching an elastic band (1994, 23). As market liberalisation intensifies, societal tensions grow, and the elastic band is either forced to snap (leading to social disintegration) or rebound, pushing the economy back into an embedded position. This dynamic is captured in Polanyi's concept of 'double movement', which describes the fight between market liberalisation and societal resistance (1994, 170). The economy's dependence on political structures is reaffirmed as new resistances arise to offset the disruptive impact of unregulated markets. In the modern context, social cooperatives represent a tangible response to this tension, offering an alternative pathway that reintroduces social values into production and exchange.

Polanyi's critique of market liberalisation echoes earlier debates in economic thought, underlining that the problematic was not discovered just by sociologists but by economists too. In fact, both Adam Smith and Karl Marx, though often positioned as opposites, acknowledged the deep ties between economy and society. Even if Smith is usually known as the father of '*laissez-faire*', he actually believed that markets function correctly only when constrained by institutional rules (Trigilia 2002, 21). According to him, public benefits arise not just from unchecked self-interest but when personal pursuits are socially disciplined. Subsequently, he introduces the concept of sympathy, which involves "identifying with values shared with other members of society, who may approve or disapprove of our behaviour" (2002, 21), thereby establishing that economic actors are not mere rational profit maximisers, but also somewhat shaped by the social norms around them. Moreover, Marx introduced the idea of the commodification of labour and how the latter is one of the main threats to social cohesion.

According to Marx, the commodification of labour is strictly linked to the creation of surplus value by the capitalists. By surplus value, he means the difference between the value created by workers and the wages they receive, a gap that becomes profit for the capitalist (Foley 1986, 47). To foster economic growth faster, workers sell their labour power, such as their capacity to work, but produce more than what they are paid for. That extra, unpaid value is surplus (1986, 47). Labour power is sold at its value, and it is used to generate more value in production, which the capitalist owns (1986, 34). Marx represents this with the M-C-M' formula: capitalists invest money (M), buy commodities (C), including labour power, and sell the finished product for more money (M') (1986, 33). The moment labour power becomes a commodity signals a historical turning point with profound social consequences (1986, 35). Labour starts to reflect a social position, living standard, and how production is organised, further alienating the worker. This alienation strips labour of human and social meaning, turning it into a commodity, just as Polanyi later described. Marx's theory of alienation explains how workers become disconnected from their work, their production, other individuals, and their own human nature (Ollman 1975, 182). At its core, there is a rupture between humans and nature, which Marx sees as the essence of human nature itself. This condition arises when individuals are deprived of agency within these production activities (1975, 178). Being deprived of control over both the content and the conditions of their labour, workers become alienated not only from their work but also from each other, as competition replaces cooperation, transforming their activity into something imposed (1975, 178). In addition to alienation, Marx identifies another structural consequence of capitalism: the formation of the 'reverse army of labour', such as a surplus population of unemployed or underemployed individuals who remain perpetually available for capitalist exploitation (Marx 1867). This group plays an essential role, as it keeps wages low and ensures that workers remain easily replaceable. As capital accumulates and productivity rises–often through technological innovation–fewer workers are needed, thereby expanding the surplus population. Consequently, this dynamic not only ensures a flexible labour supply but also consolidates the dominance of capital over labour (Marx 1867). By framing alienation as a process with social and human consequences, not only economically, Marx can be seen as a forerunner of the socio-economic analysis later developed by sociologists such as Polanyi and Giddens.

4.3.1 Generative Politics and Embedded Economics: Social Cooperatives Beyond Traditional Welfare

Since the economy became too separated from society, inequality and conflicts grew. Socialism tried to fix these problems, though not always successfully. One proposed solution was the 'cybernetic model', based on the assumption that economic output and input should be regulated by a "higher order intelligence" (Giddens 1994, 58). However, as some 'New Right' theorists observed, "No 'intelligent centre', even with the most acutely insightful body of planners, could determine the proper prices of assets brought to the marketplace" (1994, 66). According to Hayek, the market works well as it uses practical knowledge embedded in habits. This type of knowledge, described as tacit, cannot be replicated by central planners, who are not suited to make the fast-paced decisions required in modern economies (1994, 67). This theoretical gap exposes a key limitation of socialism: its struggle to provide a practical and sustainable framework for social reconstruction, demonstrating a higher critical capacity than the development of sustainable substitutes. In fact, the socialist framework, especially the Keynesian welfare model, was unable to adapt to the changes brought about by globalisation (1994, 55). The latter was based on two fundamental principles of socialism: state control of the economy and protection of the disadvantaged. Even if it was proved effective during much of the 20th century, these foundations were insufficient as socio-economic conditions evolved. In this regard, Giddens highlights how the old welfare state has perpetuated adverse outcomes by primarily emphasising male involvement and relegating women to subordinate or dependent roles (1994, 75), reflecting a conventional gender role perspective that has helped to sustain structural inequality. In addition, this welfare model usually "confines itself largely to economic matters and leaves other issues aside, including emotional, moral, and cultural concerns" (1994, 77). On this basis, Giddens tackles the topic of welfare dependency (1994, 75), explained as both an economic state and a cultural phenomenon that can cause people to feel cut off from the larger social structure. Welfare programs risk creating apathy or isolation rather than fostering social integration, which impedes community engagement. For this reason, people have started to lose interest in political debates (of both sides) as they fail to address 'life-politics'. The latter revolves around the collective challenges of humanity in a world in which progress has become double-edged (1994, 92). The ecological crisis is a prime example of how traditional economic systems, driven by constant growth, create dilemmas that future generations will inherit. As a remedy, Giddens suggests the concept of 'positive welfare' – a system that empowers individuals through active participation rather than passive dependency. Instead

of relying on a centrally planned economy, it builds on generative and emancipatory life-politics (1994, 159). By generative politics, Giddens means grassroots policies to enhance autonomy, active trust, and decentralised, bottom-up political action (1994, 93). An effective welfare system is based on community involvement, the establishment of local initiatives such as cooperatives, and a global distributive justice that recognises the historical and structural injustices that perpetuate poverty in the Global South. This requires reforming the idea of development, which, according to mainstream thoughts, primarily concerns economic expansion. As a matter of fact, beyond the productivist mindset, values like social solidarity, environmental balance, and quality of life must be integrated. Giddens refers to this state of affairs as the 'post-scarcity society' (1994, 163), which emerges when continuous economic growth becomes counterproductive, promoting a shift away from consumerism. In this society, other life values, such as environmental sustainability, ethical practices, and cultural preservation, take precedence over material accumulation. This perspective implies that combating poverty cannot be viewed only from an economic perspective; instead, it requires re-establishing the local dimension and implementing common tactics that consider environmental and social sustainability.

This rethinking of economic priorities also recalls Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), which helps explain the role of social cooperatives in balancing economic activity with social well-being within the local context. In *Gemeinschaft,* relationships are built on trust, shared values, and mutual support, where economics is linked to the act of working and sharing together (Tönnies [1887] 2001, 41). In contrast, *Gesellschaft* represents a society where economic exchanges are driven by competition and individual gain. As Tönnies puts it, "Harm to one means profit to another" (2001, 65). Social cooperatives stand somewhere in between. While they operate within a market economy, they resist the purely profit-driven logic of traditional business by prioritising solidarity and inclusion. Tönnies recognised this, stating that cooperatives are an example of economic organisations founded on community-type relations (2001, 209). Social cooperatives question the assumption that work must prioritise competition and profit, demonstrating that economic activity can be built around shared values and trust. Nevertheless, this contrast may sound too simplistic. To comprehensively analyse the role of values and norms on human actions, Granovetter's idea of embeddedness (1985) provides a valuable point of view. According to him, traditional theories often either 'oversocialise' individuals or 'undersocialise' them. On one side, the oversocialised view, common in sociology, assumes that people act mainly following social norms

almost automatically, and obedience is not perceived as a burden (Granovetter 1985, 485). From this perspective, once we know a person's social background, we can predict their choices. Conversely, the classical utilitarian economics' undersocialised perspective holds that markets function on their own thanks to competition, and "social relations and their details thus become frictional matters" (1985, 484). Granovetter moves beyond this opposition that atomises individuals by arguing that actors pursue their own interests within a network of social relations that create trust (1985, 487). Since preserving trust guarantees future transactions, those involved in these collaborations are incentivised to act honestly, which leads to the exchange of reliable information. Beyond the economic logic, these exchanges often develop a social dimension, reinforcing expectations of reciprocity and discouraging opportunism (1985, 490). In the same vein, social cooperatives can be considered as economic actors embedded in social relations, prioritising long-term relationships between the economic agents and trust and respect towards the local communities.

4.3.2 The Alternative: Social Cooperatives as Social Innovations and the Role of Empowerment

A good society fosters interpersonal relationships to create a community where people can flourish via connections and support rather than being treated as separate economic entities. Capitalism's pursuit of efficiency destroys this sort of value. Families are sacrificed for financial gain and nature for production (Mulgan 2013, 242). For this reason, there is a need for new types of economic innovations to spread through more organic growth by building new meanings as well as being useful (2013, 217). A hybrid method creates monetary and social value, leading to social innovations, which are "new ideas that meet social goals" (Mulgan et al. 2007, 8). Historically, social innovation has influenced various sectors and economic models. A striking example is Robert Owen's alternative community in New Lanark during the nineteenth century, which tried to combine economic productivity with social welfare, education, and social enrichment (2007, 10). According to Owen, the source of society's struggle at the time was the ill organisation of productive resources (Owen 1817). This dynamic pushed people to waste their potential while industries were focused on creating useless products for society, ultimately affecting the entire population. To change the situation, Owen proposed a model of agricultural and manufacturing villages in which, first of all, everyone could have access to education to correct bad habits and teach cooperation, as "It is found that when men work together for a common interest, each performs his

part more advantageously for himself and for society" (Owen 1817). This served as a structure for many other social innovation models, like more contemporary examples such as the Spanish cooperative 'Mondragon', which employs over 80,000 people and operates globally (Mulgan et al. 2007, 10), demonstrating that alternative organisational structures that balance economic productivity with social well-being can thrive in modern economies.

Further, Oosterlynck, Kazepov, and Novy (2019) argue that social innovations play a crucial role in combating poverty by challenging the limitations of mainstream welfare systems and reconfiguring the institutional structures, since social innovation emerges through bottom-up collective action. It engages various actors in developing new solutions to social exclusion, such as cooperatives of informal workers, social groceries, and training programmes for long-term unemployment (Oosterlynck et al. 2019). Social innovation addresses broader issues like exclusion and marginalisation by recognising that poverty is not just about lacking money, but it also involves barriers to education, healthcare, and social participation (2019, 5). For example, cooperatives that employ former prisoners help address both economic and social challenges, making reintegration easier. It encourages fresh approaches to social and economic organisation, establishing ways through which people can regain agency.

Within the tradition of social innovation, social cooperatives represent a concrete model that integrates social and economic goals. Social enterprises can be described as third-sector organisations that provide services aimed at combating social exclusion and delivering personal and community services (Borzaga, Santuari 2001, 166). Social cooperatives are the most prominent form of social enterprise. These organisations achieve their social mission by empowering disadvantaged individuals, eliminating socio-economic barriers that limit opportunities, and addressing personal challenges that may hinder individuals from reaching their full potential (Mongelli et al. 2018, 2). Membership includes workers, beneficiaries, volunteers (who cannot make up more than 50% of the workforce), financial members, and governmental institutions. (Borzaga, Santuari 2001, 171). According to the Italian Act of 1991, which gave legal recognition to social cooperatives, there can be two types of cooperatives. A-type offers social, health, or educational services, and B-type helps unprivileged people integrate into the workforce. They are permitted to transfer profits – in contrast with most non-profit organisations – but only under specific restrictions: a maximum of 80% of total profits can be allocated, and assets cannot be distributed upon liquidation. However, cooperatives may decide not to distribute profits but to reinvest. What makes social cooperatives unique and effective is their ability to direct services to foster people's empowerment. Instead of relying solely on financial

assistance, they prioritise service-based interventions, which have been particularly effective for vulnerable groups (2001, 177). Their local roots and trust-based networks allow them to maximise the efficiency of public resources, delivering social services to all individuals. This adaptability, combined with their entrepreneurial nature, enables them to remain at the forefront of social innovation, consistently pioneering new ways to combat marginalisation through empowerment.

Empowerment "refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability" (Kabeer 1999, 437). In this way, the main scope of social cooperatives is to provide the tools and abilities for socio-economic emancipation for all the community members and make a more accessible society. Poverty and disempowerment are logically related because the inability to meet one's basic needs frequently precludes the ability to make meaningful choices. For this reason, Kabeer (1999) distinguishes between two types of choices: first-order and second-order. The first consists of strategic life choices that shape an individual's life trajectory, such as family planning or career paths. These decisions greatly influence someone's capacity to live a self-directed and fulfilling life, and they determine personal autonomy. Instead, the second level includes secondary options that do not essentially define an individual's overall life opportunities. In this sense, empowerment means increasing a person's capacity to make first-order choices, especially if they were previously unavailable. Social cooperatives are essential to this process because they break down systematic obstacles and provide a safe space in which people may take back control over their socio-economic lives. This process unfolds three interconnected dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements (Kabeer 1999). Resources serve as a precondition for empowerment, including social and human capital and goods like education and social networks. The agency represents the core empowerment process, referring to individuals' capacity to define and act upon personal goals. It encompasses self-perception, motivation, and purpose – often called the 'power within' (1999, 438). Resources and agency are what Nussbaum (2001) and Sen (1992) refer to as 'capabilities'.

4.3.3 From Capabilities to Empowerment: How Social Business Hybrids Bridge Economic and Social Goals

Martha Nussbaum's *Capabilities Approach* (2001) builds on Amartya Sen's earlier work (*Inequality Re-examined, 1992*), which focuses on evaluating the quality of life and emphasising a pluralistic view of human well-being (Nussbaum 2001, 25). This approach prioritises substantive opportunities – such as health, education, and personal

choice – over purely economic metrics. It rejects utilitarian frameworks in favour of recognising the qualitative diversity of central human capabilities (2001, 25). Nussbaum extends the approach to incorporate concepts like human dignity and a threshold of fundamental justice. Her theory aims to construct a system of fundamental political rights guided by a specific list of central capabilities (2001, 27). For Nussbaum, capabilities refer to the substantive freedom or opportunities individuals have to choose and act, shaped by personal abilities and socio-economic-political actions (2001, 28). She makes a distinction between basic capabilities, i.e., "the innate faculties of the person that make later development and training possible" (2001, 24), and combined capabilities, which are formed when internal capabilities (personal traits like health or skills) integrate with external conditions, reflecting the real opportunities available (2001, 29). A just society fosters internal capabilities while ensuring that external conditions allow individuals to exercise their freedoms (2001, 31). Therefore, public policies and organisations like social cooperatives promote combined capabilities by enhancing internal capabilities and supporting structural conditions to integrate them. Nussbaum's approach also identifies ten central capabilities necessary for human dignity (2001, 39-40), from life to senses and emotions.

We can find the practical application of the capability approach inside the Social Business Hybrid (SBH) models. SBHs are organisations that blend components that might not seem compatible at first. Because of this special combination, SBHs can develop business strategies that produce financial benefits while tracking urgent social issues by fusing a market-driven economic dimension with a strong commitment to their social impact (Mongelli, Rullani 2024, 68). By facilitating economic capabilities – the abilities that enable people 'to be' (identity, status) and 'to do' (actions) inside the economic process of value creation, they can support a variety of types of empowerment. Generally, SBHs can support economic empowerment in two key ways. On the one hand, through creation enablement, a process in which people actively participate in creating economic value. On the other hand, through access enablement, when individuals gain access to resources or services from which they were previously excluded, either as consumers or as beneficiaries indirectly profiting from the generated value (2024, 74). These models enable individuals to become co-creators of economic values by recognising and developing their potential. In Italy, type B social cooperatives are a portrayal of this model. Mongelli and Rullani refer to this model as 'Work integration SBHs' (2024, 71). The authors claim that to enable and include the marginalised individuals inside the work sphere, there can be two main modalities: through *Integrated* SBHs, where disadvantaged people contribute as customers of the transaction,

and through *Differianted* SBHs, in which individuals have access to goods or services that were previously out of reach for them without active engagement within economic transactions intermediated by third parties (2024, 74). In the former, Integrated SBHs create enabling conditions that make market access feasible, allowing people previously excluded by structural or personal reasons to participate in the goods and services market. These programmes focus on population groups with poor purchasing power at the "base of the pyramid" (2024, 75). By employing affordable innovation, these SBH's models make basic goods affordable, enhancing the life quality of beneficiaries. This is economically sustainable, as it positively exploits to its advantage the large number of people at the base of the pyramid, transforming them into active customers and ensuring financial inclusion and empowerment.

Conversely, Differentiated SBH treats individuals with distinct needs that make engaging in productive activities or market transactions problematic. Therefore, it employs a dual-structure framework. On the one hand, it provides specialised empowering services; on the other, it provides goods or services to third parties. The revenues generated by business activities pay for the social part, maintaining financial sustainability while ensuring social responsibility (Mongelli, Rullani 2024, 75). This analysis of SBH highlights their innovative role in bridging economic and social goals to alleviate systemic inequalities. The capability approach used in this model clearly illustrates how economic empowerment can occur, including direct involvement in value creation or easier access to resources. One notable feature of SBHs is their ability to customise solutions for various groups. In this sense, type B cooperatives emphasise employment as a direct means of promoting inclusion. This strategy aids people in regaining their sense of dignity, belonging, and financial stability. Therefore, social cooperatives go beyond charity-based models, as they provide a self-sustaining way to drive social change by embedding empowerment mechanisms into business structures.

4.4 Social Cooperatives Within the Italian Penitentiary System: Structure and Challenges

Italy's prison system has been shaped by laws that have evolved since 1975, but many issues remain unresolved. Today, the system is organised into regional districts, including around 190 prisons spread across the country. Some of these facilities are housed in old, deteriorating buildings not designed for modern detention (Marietti 2019). Related to this, one of the most pressing problems is still overcrowding. As of February 2025 data reveal an occupancy rate

of 132.4%, meaning that 62.132 inmates are confined in institutions designed for 46.910 people (ANSA, 2025). Regional disparities exacerbate this crisis, as in Lombardia, Puglia, Veneto and Molise, the capacity violations are more acute (ANSA, 2025). Furthermore, demographic analysis of the incarcerated population shows concerning trends of social marginalisation. Although the proportion of foreign detainees has declined from 37.5% in 2017 to 31.9% in 2024, this group still encounters unequal challenges in accessing alternative sentencing options (Antigone 2024), underscoring how poverty and social exclusion feed into the justice system.

Rehabilitative programmes in the Italian prison system find their legal basis in Article 27 of the Constitution, also reaffirmed by prison legislation of 1975, which established the norms for the treatment of inmates. It aimed to transform the correctional philosophy from punitive confinement to social reintegration (Materia 2017). Law No. 354 of 1975 reframed work as a tool for reintegration rather than punishment. Under this law, prisoners can work either for the prison administration, receiving two-thirds of the national minimum wage, or for external employers, with social cooperatives playing a major role in offering meaningful employment opportunities (Cavotta, Rosini 2021). According to the Italian Ministry of Justice (Ministero della Giustizia), rehabilitation takes form through *trattamento rieducativo* (re-educative treatment). This structured path aims to tackle the personal and social difficulties that often contribute to crime. The process begins with an initial assessment, as outlined in 27(1) of Presidential Decree No. 230/2000, where specialists evaluate an inmate's needs and background. From there, a multidisciplinary team designs an individualised programme to encourage reintegration (Associazione Il granello di senape, 2012). The idea is to reshape attitudes that hinder social reintegration, offering inmates a real chance at rebuilding their lives, making rehabilitation more than just a principle on paper.

To encourage more initiatives, the Legge Smuraglia (Legge del 22 Giugno 2000, n. 193) was passed in 2000, giving financial benefits to companies and social cooperatives that hire inmates and recognising prisoners as disadvantaged workers who are required to comprise at least 30% of the workforce in type B cooperatives (Cavotta, Rosini 2021). However, despite these efforts, the number of inmates engaged in work activities remains low. In 2024, 17,096 prisoners were employed within the prison system, while only 4,144 worked for external employers, including social cooperatives (Ministero della Giustizia 2024; Antigone 2024). Although educational and vocational training remains highly unevenly distributed among regions. In 2024, only 6% of inmates participated in vocational courses, but this rate varied drastically: while 14% of inmates in Lombardy had access to training, in Sardinia and Basilicata, the percentage fell

below 1% (Antigone 2024). Even if the economic incentives from the *Legge Smuraglia* (Legge del 22 Giugno 2000, n. 193) have led to new employment opportunities, with 536 companies applying for subsidies in 2024 and hiring 2,276 inmates, these opportunities remain concentrated in northern Italy (Antigone 2024). Yet, data suggests that these programmes are effective: among the 18,654 inmates who participated in reintegration programmes, only 2% reoffended, compared to a national recidivism rate of nearly 70%.[1]

The Italian approach to incarceration still struggles to balance punishment with rehabilitation. Many scholars argue that the system remains focused on control and surveillance rather than on fostering opportunities for inmates to rebuild their lives, creating a hostile environment that encourages low self-esteem and confidence (Mongelli et al. 2018). Education levels are still very low. According to CNEL, in 2023, vocational training involved just 6% of inmates nationally, and less than 3% were enrolled in a university (CNEL, 2024). In contrast, northern European models emphasise education, skill-building and psychological support, showing great results in the prisoner's well-being and lowering the recidivism rate (Pamio et al. 2025, 6). This comparison highlights the limitations of the Italian model, which lacks funding and innovation, leaving many inmates without real support. Living conditions inside Italian prisons remain a serious human rights issue. In the Torreggiani case of 2013, the European Court of Human Rights condemned Italy for inhumane detention conditions, including overcrowding and inadequate facilities (European Prison Observatory 2014). Many prisons fail to meet legal standards: cells meant for one or two people hold more inmates, running water is not always available, and artificial lighting is sometimes left on continuously for security reasons. In older buildings, poor insulation means that summers are unbearably hot and winters are freezing (European Prison Observatory 2014). This system's failure has deadly consequences. In 2024, 91 inmates took their own lives, the highest number ever recorded (Ristretti Orizzonti 2025). Many were young, foreign, or struggling with mental health and addiction. Self-harm is also rising, from 16.3 incidents per 100 inmates in 2023 to 20.3 in 2024 (Antigone 2024). These numbers paint a bleak picture of life behind bars, where isolation and neglect push many into desperation. While legal reforms and work programmes have made some progress, overcrowding, regional disparities, and inadequate mental health support continue to undermine rehabilitation efforts. But the data is clear: offering inmates real opportunities, and not just punitive confinement, reduces crime and

1 Sole 24 Ore (2023). "Carcere, recidiva quasi azzerata per chi può imparare un lavoro". https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/carcere-recidiva-quasi-azzerata-chi-puo-imparare-lavoro-AE9e7TfC?refresh_ce&nof.

benefits society as a whole, as the failure to provide job opportunities to inmates deprives the Italian state of a return on GDP of up to EUR 480 million (CNEL, 2024).

4.4.1 The Venetian Penitentiary System

The prison system in Venice provides the sociological background for this essay. In Venice, there are two prisons: the male one called Santa Maria Maggiore, which is situated on the main island in the Dorsoduro neighbourhood, and the Giudecca women's prison. The former suffers from severe overcrowding and resource shortages. Designed for 156 detainees, the facility holds 268 inmates, leading to an overcrowding rate of 130% (Antigone 2024). The lack of prison personnel further limits access to rehabilitation programmes, psychological care, and work opportunities. Being a 'carcere circondariale', in which inmates are either awaiting trial or have sentences of no more than five years, it is even more challenging to pursue long-term rehabilitation. Additionally, 98.5% of detainees require psychotropic medications, highlighting widespread mental health issues that are exacerbated by poor prison conditions (Vianello 2024), as proven by the number of self-harming episodes (82 in 2024) and suicides (Antigone 2024). In contrast, the Giudecca women's prison has lower overcrowding rates and better rehabilitation programs. The facility houses about 107 women, many of whom are participating in educational and training programmes.

Regarding prison labour participation, the percentage in the Veneto region is relatively high. By collecting official data from the Italian Ministry of Justice, this essay compares the national data with the regional data, focusing on Venice.

Nationally, about 32.9% of inmates are involved in some kind of job, and in the Veneto region, this number climbs to 35.1%, hinting at a slightly more engaged approach. However, when we zoom in on the Venetian prisons, it is noticeable that at Santa Maria Maggiore, only 23.5% of inmates work. Most of them (20.9%) are employed by the prison itself, while just 2.5% work for third-party organisations, mainly social cooperatives. This low percentage shows how just a few bridges exist between the prison and the outside world, limiting the chances to prepare for life outside. The situation in the Giudecca's prison is quite different. Here, 44.1% of inmates are working, with nearly a third (28.4%) doing so through external employers, including social cooperatives. This suggests a stronger link between the prison and Venice's social fabric and a larger use of work as a way to build reintegration.

Table 1 Sample data on inmates' work

	Italy	Veneto	Venice (Santa Maria Maggiore)	Venice (Giudecca)
Total Inmates	61,480	2,587	277	102
Working for Prison Administration	17,096 (27.8%)	522 (20.2%)	58 (20.9%)	16 (15.7%)
Working for External Employers	3,144 (5.1%)	386 (14.9%)	7 (2.5%)	29 (28.4%)
Total Working Inmates	20,240 (32.9%)	908 (35.1%)	65 (23.5%)	45 (44.1%)

Source: Department of Prison Administration (2024) – Office of the Head of Department – General Secretariat – Statistics Section

4.4.2 The Role of Social Cooperatives Working with Inmates and Their Common Challenges

In 2024, out of the 5% of inmates, 4% were employed in social cooperatives (CNEL, 2024). The latter stands out as one of the most effective tools for rehabilitation and reducing recidivism. What makes them different is the way they help inmates not just to get a job but actually rebuild their sense of self. Rather than simply offering training, they support disadvantaged individuals through personalised plans, providing a safe environment where people receive guidance, build skills, and are supported in finding suitable employment in the regular job market (Furfaro 2008). As shown by recent studies, the benefits of these cooperatives derive from their ability to support identity transformation and the development of a positive self-image. Through rehabilitation processes focused on respect, mainly particularised respect – given to individuals based on their qualities and achievements – and generalised respect – the one that cannot be earned but is given to everyone just because they are part of a social group – inmates experience social validation that supports the emergence of new personal and social identities (Rogers et al. 2017, 228). By feeling respected and validated, they start seeing themselves not only as ex-offenders but also as workers and members of society. This process, called 'identity decoupling', allows them to hold onto their past without being trapped by it (2017, 259).

Social cooperatives support this positive process by embracing an approach based on Integral Human Development (IHD), which addresses the person's physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions (Mongelli et al. 2018). In fact, they go beyond mere employment by offering opportunities for skill development (physical dimension), fostering trust, collaboration and a sense of belonging

(psychological dimension), and cultivating self-confidence and the desire for self-improvement (spiritual dimension) (Mongelli et al. 2018). This happens through the creation of a safe space combined with exposure to the outside reality of structured work, enabling inmates to experience growth not only as workers but as individuals, which is essential for long-term reintegration. Translating these ideas into practice, Mongelli et al. (2018) explore the experience of *Made in Carcere,* a social cooperative that works with incarcerated women. Their research shows how these cooperatives create what they call "safe space" inside prison – places where, even if just temporarily, inmates can step away from the rigid and often dehumanising routines of prison life (Mongelli et al. 2018). These spaces, both materially and symbolically, allow inmates to reimagine who they are, how they relate to others, and what kind of future they can build for themselves. This shift happens during the workshops. Away from the rigid prison discipline, inmates are invited to step into new roles, explore different values and experience human interactions. Through practical tasks and shared responsibilities, a sense of community takes shape. They help each other, learn new skills and build new relationships. The initial macro-process of safe space creation unfolds through two core micro-processes: skill-based training and the cultivation of an interactional space (Mongelli et al. 2018). Training, often guided by other inmates, helps keep the mind active and gives new meaning to the time spent in prison, replacing monotony with purposeful activity. At the same time, the chance to connect freely with peers strengthens social bonds and creates space for collaboration and support. These moments allow inmates to see themselves not just as prisoners but as people with skills, ideas, and something to contribute (Mongelli et al. 2018). By giving prisoners a sense of connection to life outside of prison, cooperatives build upon this foundation and introduce a second process. Inmates gain confidence and autonomy by being given real responsibilities, such as managing deadlines, working on actual products, and occasionally even participating in design or creative decisions (Mongelli et al. 2018). Finally, the cooperative strengthens this transformation through the implementation of a system of recognition and reward. From salary payments to the company's official recognition of their accomplishments, inmates receive monetary compensation and symbolic acknowledgement of their labour, strengthening their sense of worth and purpose.

The impact of this process is powerful, as the social support and the trust-building mechanisms that cooperatives promote help inmates to overcome defensive attitudes, such as suspicion towards changes in their employment conditions and towards income earnings; attitudes often shaped by prior marginalisation and trauma (Cavotta, Rosini 2021). Over time, this helps change how they portray work. It is

no longer just something they do to earn benefits in prison, but it becomes a path to personal growth and a contribution to society. As emphasised by Cavotta and Rosini (2021), social cooperatives focus on cultivating interpersonal skills like teamwork, rule observance and the ability to relate to authority figures – skills vital for reintegration but often underdeveloped among the incarcerated population. This approach brings the idea of rehabilitation closer to everyday life, helping inmates rediscover the meaning of effort and responsibility in a positive way, increasing the likelihood that the inmate will maintain employment after release, a key factor against recidivism.

Still, this work is not that easy or smooth. One of the biggest challenges social cooperatives face inside prisons is the prison system itself due to its rigidity. Strict rules governing inmate movements, schedules and permissions often clash with the need for flexibility and responsiveness that productive work environments require (Cavotta, Rosini 2021). Cooperatives must constantly reorganise their work schedules and even assign roles to accommodate not only the institutional constraints but also the psychological conditions of inmates, many of whom experience high levels of stress, trauma and mental health disorders. These dynamics can lead to deficits in productivity (Cavotta, Rosini 2021), which cooperatives must overcome without compromising their rehabilitative mission. There are also problems outside the prison walls. Former inmates often face strong social stigma, both while they are still inside prison and after release. This makes it hard for cooperatives to find partners, raise funds, or place people in jobs (Kılıç, Tuysuz 2024). Discrimination by employers, limited housing, and background checks are everyday barriers. Many ex-prisoners also lack basic job skills, and while cooperatives try to fill that gap, they often do not have the resources to do it. These financial constraints and the mental health care biases also limit the psychological support in the prison (Kılıç, Tuysuz 2024). All these legal, social and economic obstacles further complicate reintegration efforts and increase the risk of recidivism.

4.5 Case Studies: Rio Terà and Il Cerchio

To better understand the role of prison-based cooperatives, this essay investigates the origins, structures, and challenges of two cooperatives through qualitative research methods, including interviews and information from websites. The cooperatives in question are Rio Terà dei Pensieri, founded in Venice in 1994, and Il Cerchio, established in 1997, also in Venice. Both emerged from direct experiences within the prison system, driven by the need to offer alternatives to incarceration and foster social reintegration. Rio Terà dei Pensieri, in particular, emerged from the lived experience

of incarceration and the desire to provide new pathways for rehabilitation beyond the cell: "Thirty years ago, there was nothing in prisons – no workshops, no associations, just forced idleness. The founders asked themselves what could have been done to offer an alternative to the cell" (interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). Similarly, Il Cerchio originated from the work of a volunteer in prison associated with Il Granello di Senape, aiming to provide structured opportunities for reintegration. As explained by one representative of the cooperative:

> It was born from the need to offer new opportunities through work and to respond more effectively to the challenges of social reintegration. At the time, there was no support network for people finishing their sentences, despite Article 27 of the Constitution, which states that punishment must aim at rehabilitation. (interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025)

Thus, both cooperatives arose from prison experiences and the need to fill rehabilitative service gaps.

4.5.1 Il Cerchio

Il Cerchio operates as a multiservice cooperative, meaning that they do not focus on a single target market but try to draw on different categories of work to make sense of what they have to do: to give those with a present or past rough path with the law a chance not to be excluded from society (interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025). The cooperative started off small, with a contract on Pellestrina Island in Venice, employing just two semi-free detainees. Over time, it has grown impressively, reaching between 250 and 280 workers and assisting around 800 incarcerated individuals.[2] This growth reflects their strategy to embed as many former detainees as possible into various labour sectors, with the aim of reducing recidivism through stable employment:

> Often, those who have served their sentences risk being excluded from society, with a high risk of reoffending. Without concrete opportunities, reintegration becomes difficult. Il Cerchio is committed to representing and offering that possibility, turning work into a tool for rebirth and dignity.(Il Cerchio's website, 2025)

2 Il Cerchio Cooperativa Sociale (2025). Chi siamo. `https://www.ilcerchiovenezia.it/chi-siamo/`.

The cooperative has two active projects inside the prison's walls. First, there is the tailoring project inside the Venetian women's prison, which has become their most symbolic initiative. The idea was not to just teach practical sewing skills but also to give women the chance to express themselves creatively through inspirational ideas. As a matter of fact, the cooperative sought to revive the centuries-old tradition, carried out within a tailoring workshop already present inside the prison's building, where the women are guided through training with the objective of freeing their creativity. The inmates themselves came up with the designs, allowing the creative expression to flourish behind bars (interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025). The initiative began through partnerships with major companies that donated high-quality fabrics, which the women then transformed into garments. To encourage a sense of belonging and confidence, these garments are later sold outside the prison in their shop *Bancalotto N. 10* (interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025). Underlying these efforts is a profound philosophy that guides the workshop. Firstly, it teaches responsibility through the use of tools: "There are girls who are imprisoned for violent crimes. Holding dressmaker's scissors in one's hands gives a strong sense of responsibility." (interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025). Secondly, the workshop gives them a sense of personal development. The acquisition of new skills prepares them for the external work environment: "In a world where manual skills are being lost and the presence of these jobs and professionals is in high demand, it is essential to create a CV for the person who will sooner or later leave".

The second big initiative is the laundry project, founded in 2004, which employs about twenty incarcerated women. It offers professional water and dry-cleaning services and even linen rental, giving the women a real job experience as a first step toward social reintegration. It was initially conceived to meet the needs of the Venetian penitentiaries, but it grew and transformed, becoming the only industrial laundry in the historic centre of Venice (Il Cerchio's website, 2025). Today, the laundry collaborates with a wide range of hospitality businesses, including some of the most prestigious hotels in Venice and even public institutions like the Criminal Chamber, handling the cleaning of the robes (Il Cerchio's website, 2025). Beyond this project within the prisons, Il Cerchio has expanded into external services as well, with jobs for the maintenance of green areas, catering, and sanitation. This wide range of activities helps ensure that support for ex-detainees does not stop at the prison gate.

When it comes to recruiting disadvantaged workers, Il Cerchio's process is quite similar to that of a traditional company. For those serving alternative sentences, like probation, they first identify available vacancies within the structures, then search for candidates, usually through social workers. Candidates are interviewed, and if

they are considered eligible, they are hired based on their previous job experiences and the interview's outcome (interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025). In addition, the training for these individuals tends to be conducted mostly 'on the job', aiming to match their prior skills with the cooperative's needs. For incarcerated individuals, however, the process is different. Since not all prisoners are eligible to work, only those meeting specific legal conditions, such as having served a significant portion of their sentence and not being convicted for particular offences, can participate. Prison educators assess eligibility and contact the cooperative when a suitable candidate is identified (interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025). Once selected, the prisoner is integrated into a work project designed to ensure continuity in respect of her emotional and psychological condition (Il Cerchio's website, 2025). After all these selection processes, training typically starts with a one-month internship, after which the individual can begin work activities inside the prison (interview with Il Cerchio representative, Feb. 2025).

In terms of governance, Il Cerchio is organised similarly to a joint-stock company (SPA in Italian). The members' assembly elects a Board of Directors (CDA), which in turn appoints the president and vice-president. Although this body plays a largely political role and is not directly involved in daily operations, it defines the cooperative's strategic objectives. Beneath it, there are managers responsible for various departments (administration, human resources, commercial operations, etc.), each supervising sector heads who directly manage operational teams (interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025). Accordingly, this structure, thanks to the presence of a members' assembly and a board that share the same social goals, helps keep decisions focused on what really matters: finding a balance between running things efficiently and staying true to the principles of solidarity and inclusion.

4.5.2 Rio Terà dei Pensieri

Rio Terà dei Pensieri is a social cooperative founded in Venice in 1994, with the mission of promoting training and employment opportunities within the city's penitentiary system. Its story began at a visiting table in the men's prison, a symbolic place where two worlds met: incarcerated individuals and people from outside the prison committed to breaking the cycle of forced idleness through meaningful work. As stated on their website, the cooperative was born to give a tangible form to Article 27 of the Italian Constitution, promoting rehabilitation through practical alternatives to passive

detention.[3] At the heart of its approach, there is a strong belief in the transformative power of manual, creative, and ecological work. The cooperative explicitly states that: "Through work, and especially through artisanal and creative work, people can begin a silent but progressive process of change, testing themselves and discovering new qualities, until they regain the dignity often lost in detention". (Rio Terà dei Pensieri's website, 2025). As a matter of fact, the workshops they run are not just about job placement– they are spaces where personal identity and social relationships can be rebuilt. This vision runs through all their projects, from the well-known *Malefatte* line to the *Orto delle Meraviglie.* The cooperative is active in both the men's prison at Santa Maria Maggiore and the women's one on Giudecca Island. In the former, *Malefatte* was launched back in 1999 as a leather goods lab, then restructured in 2009 to focus on upcycling PVC banners into unique fashion accessories: "The idea came from a creative graphic designer for the Venice municipality, Fabrizio Olivetti. Instead of throwing the banners away, he came to Rio Terà, and with the municipality's support, the project grew" (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). Even the name *Malefatte* – literally 'misdeeds' – was chosen with intention: it reclaims both the discarded material and the social stigma tied to incarceration, turning them into something new and valuable (Rio Terà dei Pensieri's website, 2025). The cooperative also runs a screen-printing lab, active since 1995, where inmates print on t-shirts and tote bags, often for well-known cultural institutions like Teatro La Fenice and Palazzo Grassi (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). This integration of the cooperative's work into the city's prestigious institutions further reinforces the notion that inmates are not outside society but actively contributing to it. Moreover, in the women's prison on Giudecca, the focus shifts to cosmetics and agriculture. Under the supervision of a certified chemist, inmates are trained in the production of natural skincare products, which are sold as part of the cooperative's ethical cosmetics line (Rio Terà dei Pensieri's website, 2025). Not far from the lab, the *Orto delle Meraviglie,* a 6,000 square-metre garden, serves as a space for ecological and agricultural training, together with the creation of a community both among inmates and with the outside society. Today, it produces over forty varieties of vegetables, herbs and flowers cultivated with respect for the environment (Rio Terà dei Pensieri's website, 2025). Most importantly, the women who work the land also run the public product stall on Thursdays, directly engaging with the Venetian citizens: "The women who cultivated the crops

3 Rio Terà dei Pensieri (2025). Chi siamo. `https://www.rioteradeipensieri.org/cooperativa/`.

are the ones selling them. It is a key moment for the participation and contact with the community." (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). These projects are not isolated from the broader reintegration process, which the cooperative has gradually expanded to include post-release support. Rio Terà offers a structured pathway that begins with training and internships inside the prison and extends to external employment and housing upon release. The selection process begins either through official training courses or informal applications. Candidates undergo an eligibility check, a short interview, and a training period of one to two months. Whereupon, the inmates follow a four- to five-month internship supported by a municipal work grant. If successful, the person may then be formally employed under the national cooperative contract (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025).

Regarding external reintegration jobs, they often rely on three main channels: Veritas, the city's street-cleaning service; the external *Malefatte* lab in Marghera; and the cooperative's shop in Venice in the San Polo neighbourhood. Each project is adapted to the individual's legal status, skills and needs. Additionally, the cooperative obtained two housing units for recently released male inmates, acknowledging that employment alone is insufficient to prevent recidivism of ex-offenders. This is no small accomplishment in a city like Venice, where growing tourism frequently overlooks the needs of residents:

> It is very difficult to find a stable home in Venice because the political trend here is to focus more on tourists than on locals. However, we have managed to collaborate with public and private entities to make this happen. (interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025)

This deep commitment to inclusion, solidarity, ecological sustainability, and artisanal quality is anchored in a strong and effective governance model. The cooperative is led by a board of three: President Vania Carlot, Vice President Emanuela Lucidi, and a third director. It includes thirty members, a mix of volunteers and disadvantaged workers. Decision-making is shared with the operator group, which consists of the board and the prison-based staff (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). This way of working ensures that economic goals never overshadow the cooperative's deeper mission: restoring dignity, agency, and opportunities to often forgotten people.

4.5.3 Research Findings: Common Challenges and the Role of Tourism

The interviews with the representatives from Rio Terà dei Pensieri and Il Cerchio offer a vivid picture of how social cooperatives operate within a complex and highly competitive economic environment like the one in Venice, where tourism dominates much of the urban fabric. The results from this research show how, although both cooperatives depict work as the cornerstone of social reintegration, they apply this principle through different strategies and models. One of the evident points of convergence is the recognition that "balancing social and economic goals is the real, daily challenge" (Interview with the Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). In particular, Rio Terà, as a social enterprise positioned within a competitive marketplace, is aware of its structural disadvantage: "We are in the market like any other artisanal screen-printing workshop, fully knowing that we are not competitive. Today's market is automated, but we go against the trend" (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). As a matter of fact, Rio Terà is grounded in artisanal, small-scale production. For this reason, it explicitly distances itself from the logic of automation and economic efficiency typical of mainstream, highly productive markets. Their approach is intentionally labour-intensive, using traditional four-arm manual presses to maximise employment rather than fast production. Instead, Il Cerchio follows a multi-service model and operates primarily through public tenders in sectors such as catering, cleaning, and green maintenance, rather than mainly focusing on artisanal production like Rio Terà. Nevertheless, it also faces increasing market pressure. According to its representative, "There used to be an understanding that the goal was social, and clients accepted the imperfections. Today, the market demands that we perform like any regular business" (Interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025).

In this context, tourism plays an ambivalent role. On the one hand, it provides visibility and economic resources. For Rio Terà, the shop in San Polo and international online sales, especially to countries like Germany and France, represent important income streams. The cooperative distinguishes between "the local citizens, who are sensitive to the prison theme and support the project, and the tourists, who have always enthusiastically welcomed the initiative" (Interview with the Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). However, it remains critical of Venice's dominant tourism model: "We have always chosen not to expand. We remain small but attentive to the people we work with. We could have made typical souvenirs, like masks, but we prefer to remain consistent with our project" (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025). In fact, previous attempts to sell to souvenir shops have failed, as "those

who buy this type of product are not interested in having it printed artisanally" (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025) and prefer to maximise profit by selling products made with cheap materials and by a form of labour disconnected from any social purpose or concern for human dignity. Consequently, the cooperative's main way to remain competitive is to communicate each product's social and ethical meaning to the public, relying on values like sustainability and solidarity rather than mass appeal.

Regarding Il Cerchio, even if it has fewer interactions with tourism, it still acknowledges the influence of tourism on its operations. For instance, by purposefully positioning the *Bancalotto N.10* store close to the Rialto Bridge, the cooperative takes advantage of the foot traffic of tourists. In addition, the cooperative also manages a prison laundry that provides services to hotels and B&Bs. Even if tourism can be a financial help in these cases, the cooperative's representative explained how, due to the rise of 'hit-and-run' tourism, many visitors fail to grasp the mission behind the cooperative's products. The brief duration of most tourists' stays in Venice prevents them from understanding the social value embedded in these goods, an element that sets them apart from typical commercial items. This dynamic increases the disadvantage of cooperatives in an economy heavily based on mass tourism and mass consumption, revealing a deep tension between the long-term goals of social reintegration and the fast, superficial consumption pattern typical of mass tourism. As the representative notes:

> To convey a complex message, it takes time. In a fast-paced, low-cost tourism system, our message arrives only marginally. Some foreign clients, particularly from the US and Canada, are attracted to the products but often fall in love with the garment rather than for what is behind it. (Interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025)

Another obstacle that can also be linked to tourism is the housing crisis, which, aggravated by platforms like Airbnb and the rise of rent costs, makes finding accommodation almost unattainable for former inmates and for the cooperatives that try to help them outside prison.

Furthermore, both cooperatives face persistent institutional barriers that hinder their efforts. As Rio Terà explains,

> After three renewals, a temporary contract must become permanent. However, we cannot realistically permanently hire all the inmates who work with us. For this reason, we try to keep people as long as possible and then direct them towards other realities. This strategy is essential to maintain the cooperative in the long term. (Interview with a Rio Terà dei Pensieri's representative, Feb. 2025)

To counterbalance this challenge and financially maintain the cooperative, Rio Terà relies on partnerships with organisations like MACE, which employs ex-prisoners in the hospitality sector, and on big supporters such as the artist Mark Bradford, who brought visibility and helped expand external support networks. Beyond contractual and economic constraints, another point to consider concerns the strict regulations governing prisons and the persistent social bias against inmates, which often pose significant obstacles for cooperatives working with inmates (Interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025). On top of that, the intolerable condition of many Italian detention facilities, marked by high suicide rates and severe overcrowding, exposes a structural fallacy within the prison system itself, which not only undermines the dignity and rehabilitation of inmates but also makes it increasingly harder for social cooperatives to operate effectively.

Internally, Il Cerchio must also deal with organisational challenges. With more than 150 workers from over 50 nationalities (125 non-disadvantaged workers and 23 disadvantaged, seven of whom are inmates), maintaining cohesion and shared goals can be complicated: "Finding a common language to share objectives is a major challenge. We have to manage a highly diverse and widespread organisation" (Interview with Il Cerchio's representative, Feb. 2025).

Taken together, the experiences of Rio Terà and Il Cerchio reveal both the potential and the fragility of socially orientated enterprise in a context marked by commercial, organisational complexity and mass tourism. While ethical employment models can survive, they require continuous adaptation, institutional support, and consumer awareness to remain viable.

4.6 Interpreting the Findings

The following chapter offers a critical interpretation of the research findings illustrated before by placing them in dialogue with the theoretical framework and the socio-economic reality of Venice. Rather than presenting the findings in isolation, the discussion follows a threefold narrative: it examines how social cooperatives act and adapt within the city, how their strategies resonate with or challenge theoretical concepts, and how they are shaped by – and respond to – the pressures of a tourism-driven urban economy. Through this intertwined interpretation, the cooperatives' practices are re-understood as meaningful forms of agency, resistance, and innovation. As a result, the chapter highlights the complex dynamics at play between local action, structural constraints, and socio-economic transformations.

4.6.1 Social Cooperatives as Counter-Movements Against Capitalist Pressures

The findings confirm that social cooperatives in Venice function not only as hybrid organisations balancing social and economic objectives, but they can also be considered as what Karl Polanyi (1994) would describe as counter-movements, such as socio-environmental and economic responses to the disembedding forces of the market (Polanyi 1994). Polanyi argued that unregulated markets tend to strip economic life from its social context by commodifying land, labour, and money. Social cooperatives respond to this phenomenon by re-embedding economic life within social institutions and relationships. This is particularly evident in their relationship with tourism. Rather than submitting to the logic of mass tourism and mass consumption, these cooperatives use their economic activity as a tool of resistance, crafting business models that push back against commodification, marginalisation, and depersonalisation. By doing so, their presence in the market does not signify compliance but rather a repositioning: they operate within the economy but against the dominant logic. Decisions such as refusing to produce souvenir goods, staying intentionally small, or placing great importance on the storytelling of their ethical products are not just branding strategies but economic decisions with a social meaning. Therefore, instead of letting tourism reshape their identity, the cooperatives internalised the principles of the counter-movement in the very way they produce and sell.

In addition, their approach also aligns with Anthony Giddens' concept of generative politics, which calls for grassroots actions that enhance autonomy, decentralisation, and community involvement (Giddens 1994). By creating a sense of community within the work environment and with the consumer, the cooperative model becomes a broad strategy to reclaim agency, dignity and solidarity within an increasingly extractive economy. However, there is also a degree of ambiguity. Giddens tried to depict a third way between socialism and capitalism, which could be economically efficient and resistant in the market while remaining ethical. However, as reported by the interviews, when the market pressures aggravated by tourism become too intensive, the cooperatives prefer to step back. But this partial retreat is not a sign of weakness. In this way, these cooperatives do not simply mediate between market and society; rather, they build an economic microcosm that follows its own logics, values and temporality. In this light, their marginality becomes a form of autonomy. They do not reject the market but actively choose a different one, which is slower and more respectful of their workers. Consequently, instead of saying that these cooperatives embody a third way, it would be better to state that they create their own way.

4.6.2 Reclaiming Agency Through Work: From Alienation to Intentionality

What emerges from the findings is not merely a story of adaptation to structural constraints but of intentional design: a deliberate effort by the cooperative management to preserve human agency within economic production. This is particularly visible in the case of Il Cerchio and its initiative *Bancalotto N.10,* in which incarcerated women are involved in meaningful labour processes that include their voices and choices. This approach starkly contrasts what Marx (1867) described as alienation – a condition in which workers are stripped of their control over both the process and the product of their labour. Alienation, Marx argues, is not only economic but deeply social and existential: it excludes the workers from their creative potential, their peers, and their human nature (Ollman 1975). In contrast, Il Cerchio and Rio Terà dei Pensieri create a working environment intentionally designed not to mirror the alienating conditions of the mainstream economy. For example, the fact that inmates are involved in shaping the design's aesthetics and meaning of what they produce suggests that labour is not imposed upon them but co-constructed. Importantly, this resistance is not accidental but a specific and well-thought-out managerial choice. As interviews make clear, the cooperatives could scale up, standardise, or even fully integrate into the tourist economy; their workers might be capable of doing so. However, management refuses this path precisely to protect those same workers from being absorbed into systems where they would lose the autonomy and solidarity that define the cooperative's ethos. In other words, it is not just a matter of ability but mainly of principle. Thereby, the cooperative actively defies the capitalist imperative of surplus generation, instead challenging the very structure that produces exclusion. Its decision to limit expansion is not a sign of fragility or a casualty, but an act out of coherence with a broader critique of commodification and alienation. Much like Marx's analysis of the working class being exploited, the two cooperatives reclaim work as a space for reconnection with oneself and with others. Within Venice's tourist-dominated economy, where speed, visibility and availability often define value, this model presents a quiet but powerful refusal: it insists that work must serve people, not the other way around.

4.6.3 Building Communities, Not Just Workplaces: Solidarity, Embeddedness, and the Cooperative Ethos

This intentional refusal to reproduce alienating working conditions not only preserves individual agency but also reshapes the fabric

of relations within and outside the cooperatives. What emerges is fundamentally a new approach to building cooperation. In fact, the findings show that social cooperatives do not simply organise labour, but they cultivate living, breathing communities. Ferdinand Tönnies' [1887] (2001) distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) helps delineate a boundary between mainstream workplace collaboration and the cooperative's one. While *Gesellschaft* refers to a model of social life based on individual performance and strategic interactions, *Gemeinschaft* captures relations built on mutual support, shared values and trust (Tönnies 2001). In other words, not all human interactions are genuinely emotionally worthwhile, and not all collaborative working relationships result in genuine, meaningful connections. Even the most efficient corporate team may appear 'collaborative' while still operating within a system of alienation and exploitation. This distinction is especially striking in a setting like Venice, where economic life is shaped by impersonality. In contrast to the push for efficiency and scale, the two cooperatives promote a slower, embedded and more relational way of working, rooted in mutual care instead of mere coordination. What sets them apart is not just what they do, but how they do it. As a matter of fact, cooperation in this context becomes an ethical and emotional process close to the idea of community proposed by Tönnies, as the ability to respond to tourism-induced stress is distributed across a trust-based network of cooperation, which includes workers but also other social cooperatives such as MACE and external allies like the artist Mark Bradford. The role of trust in these connections is fundamental, as Granovetter (2017) puts it, "Trust and trustworthy behaviour are critical assets for any economy, principally because they lead people to cooperate". (Granovetter 2017, 56). Similarly, the relationships within and around the cooperative rely on shared histories, emotional bonds, and a common purpose, enhancing organisational cohesion and resilience. Granovetter also distinguishes different types of embedded relationships in this context. On one hand, relational embeddedness refers to the bonds between pairs of individuals (2017, 17), whether between inmates and the staff or between the cooperatives and the local population. These relationships are shaped by shared experiences and emotional closeness, creating a work culture that fosters confidence, responsibility, and collective creativity. On the other hand, structural embeddedness involves the overall structure of the social network in which individuals are situated (2017, 18). For example, as Granovetter explains, a worker may feel closer to their supervisor if the latter is known to be respected and trusted by the rest of the team. It is a matter of information exchange and networks that build this embeddedness, as the sense of trust does not exist in isolation, but it spreads through the whole organisation. The findings suggest that this cooperation and embeddedness play out on

multiple levels. First, within the workshops themselves, cooperation strengthens individual motivation and creativity. Inmates are not simply executing tasks – they are creating something together. This generates a shared sense of ownership and purpose. For instance, the ability of Il Cerchio to maintain a stable and inclusive workforce, despite its high internal diversity, is not just the fruit of good coordination but mainly of the presence of a shared narrative of care, inclusion and ethical commitment. However, the dynamic goes further. It reaches out to local customers, including institutional and economic partners, who support the project for its products, mainly because they identify with its narrative. Therefore, it would be fair to say that this type of solidaristic relationship, embedded in the cooperative's structure, positively influences a great number of stakeholders. The kind of cooperation seen in these cooperatives radically differs from standard teamwork in a mainstream business setting: it is not just about assembling labour for maximum efficiency but especially about building valuable human relationships that truly empower.

4.6.4 Local Resistance against the Tourism Monoculture

The implications of the embedded, community-based model extend beyond the cooperative's walls. In a city like Venice, where tourism has become the dominant economic engine, these solidaristic networks take on an even deeper significance. What the findings reveal is that the cooperatives' mode of action constitutes a deliberate form of local resistance to the city's increasingly monocultural economy. This intentional choice to stay small and avoid mass-market souvenir production constitutes a countermovement in the Polanyian sense that can also be seen as a locally grounded effort to diversify the city's economic fabric. This resistance becomes even more relevant when situated within Venice's current socio-economic and urban landscape. As Bertocchi, Camatti, and Van Der Borg (2020) explain, Venice has become a textbook case of '*iper-turismo*', where the physical and social carrying capacities of the city are routinely exceeded due to structural limitations and relentless visitor flows (Bertocchi et al. 2020, 41). With over 4.6 million visitors annually, 70% of whom concentrate in the historical centre (Choi et al. 2024), the city far exceeds its sustainable capacity. Research points out that the estimated maximum daily capacity is around 19,000 hotel guests, 25,000 tourists using complementary accommodations, and a few thousand day trippers – figures that nearly equal the current number of residents (Bertocchi et al. 2020, 54).

While tourism can actually generate important economic opportunities and cultural exchanges, its unchecked expansion

creates an overdependence that undermines the long-term sustainability of the city as a whole (Camatti 2024, 109). In fact, such extreme reliance leaves cities highly exposed to external shocks, like seasonal downturns, economic crises and natural disasters (2024, 109). In the case of Venice, its particular geography and concentration of attractions in the historic centre have only intensified this process. Venice has witnessed a process of spatial and economic transformation in which the urban fabric is progressively reconfigured to serve the needs of visitors rather than residents. This transformation, intensified by the rise of peer-to-peer rentals and short-term accommodations such as Airbnbs, has led to the displacement of local housing, the decline of public services, and the prioritisation of commercial spaces geared entirely toward tourism (Bertocchi et al. 2020, 42-3). As a result, the increase in businesses catering exclusively to tourists has led to the progressive marginalisation of areas that once served the needs of residents (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019). Since the 1970s, local shops were replaced by souvenir stands, fast-food chains, and luxury retail – often franchises rather than locally owned – and the majority are located in the San Marco area (Bertocchi, Visentin 2019) In this way, as tourism becomes the dominant framework, the social contract between residents and the city begins to erode (Camatti 2024, 111).

Cities that rely heavily on tourism often become trapped in a vulnerable economic monoculture: what initially appears as a resource for development can quickly become a constraint, limiting economic diversification and the promotion of innovation in other sectors (Camatti 2024, 111). In this context, social cooperatives offer a rare but essential deviation from this dominant trend. Their small-scale and socially embedded economic practices disrupt the homogeneity of the monocultural economy. Rio Terà dei Pensieri and Il Cerchio do not oppose tourism in principle, but they resist being absorbed by its logic, maintaining a piece of economic independence. In addition, this resistance extends beyond the cooperatives themselves. It is woven into the daily practices of the residents, who often engage in subtle, everyday forms of refusal: avoiding streets usually too full of tourists, supporting small local businesses, or choosing to participate in more relational and social forms of exchange. As Gravari-Barbas and Jacquot (2017, 35) remind us, local resistance does not always take the form of a formal political protest. Sometimes it is expressed through gestures that go unnoticed – a quiet decision to preserve local rhythms in the face of economic pressure. Social cooperatives recognise and reflect this kind of resistance. Locals support their work not only for what it offers to marginalised people but also because it restores a sense of connection and continuity with the Venice they want to live in.

4.6.5 A Shared Alternative: The Right to Choose a Life Beyond Tourism

What if the economic alternatives proposed by the cooperatives were not just addressed to the marginalised but to everyone? That is what emerges as the '*fil rouge*' between the findings: the deliberate effort of the cooperatives to place individuals, regardless of their social status, in a condition to act autonomously. As introduced before, by resisting the pressures of the monoculture and remaining economically independent, the cooperative offers an alternative to everyone who wants to avoid working in tourism. This mechanism resonates with the capabilities approach developed by Martha Nussbaum (2001), which builds on Amartya Sen's work to evaluate the quality of life through the real opportunities individuals can choose and the skills they can acquire. This approach places agency, human dignity and freedom at the centre of development, rather than income or productivity. As Nussbaum suggests, a just society is one that secures not only the internal capabilities (like health or skills, for example) but also ensures the structural conditions for individuals to express those capabilities in action (Nussbaum 2001, 29). That is where cooperatives come in. The resistance towards the monoculture, combined with the social goals that characterise their economic activity, helps the cooperatives create these enabling conditions. However, once again, the beneficiaries are not just inmates or people in difficulty but also non-marginalised individuals who empathise with the struggle and do not want to have a job circumscribed by the city's tourism. For instance, Il Cerchio, where 125 out of 148 workers are not classified as disadvantaged, yet they decide to work in an environment grounded in care, flexibility and inclusion. The cooperatives do not merely fill gaps left by the market; they create spaces for those who wish to live and work in Venice without being absorbed by tourism. In other words, they support individual empowerment and the collective right to live and work in Venice differently. As Camatti (2024) notes, cities must urgently diversify their economies to remain resilient, and social cooperatives contribute to this vision by building a parallel economy, smaller in scale but richer in social meaning and local coherence.

4.7 Conclusion

Venice is often reduced to a postcard, a tourist attraction, consumed by its popularity. However, behind the curtain of mass tourism, this essay has tried to uncover small acts of resistance. What emerged is that the social cooperatives studied do not just survive within this environment: they respond to it, reshape it, and, in their own way,

push back. As explored in the final chapter, these cooperatives act as countermovements, following the theories of Polanyi, to challenge the disembedding logic of the market. Their refusal to produce mass-market souvenirs or scale up for profit is not just a practical choice, but a political and ethical one. They are choosing slowness, relationship, and meaning in a place where efficiency and visibility are often the only measures of value. What is powerful is that the vision these cooperatives offer is not just meant for the marginalised. Instead, it speaks to anyone who feels out of place in today's market, those who are tired of jobs that feel disconnected or of living in a city that no longer feels theirs. Furthermore, these cooperatives remind us that choosing to enhance small, artisanal production and to stick to their values can also be considered a form of success. Sometimes, that looks like a workshop where inmates co-design the products they make. Sometimes, it is simply the choice not to sell mainstream souvenirs. Their work goes far beyond employment. These cooperatives build spaces of belonging where people can reconnect with themselves, with others and with the possibilities of change, rejecting the schemes of alienation that Marx strongly criticised. Even in the tough context of incarceration, they manage to do so. What stands out is that these organisations are not stepping outside the market. They remain viable, they sell products, they pay salaries. But they are doing so on their own terms, showing that building another kind of economy is possible. Even if they may be small and sometimes overlooked, they still invite us to choose: do we passively accept the logic of the market as inevitable, or do we dare to defend other ways of living and working based on care and interactions? Therefore, rather than offering a final answer, this conclusion is more like an invitation to continue looking at the margins to recognise the seeds of transformation in them.

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