Deconstructing homelessness: Alternative narratives on and by marginalized and homeless groups in the city of Bologna

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Abstract The paper addresses the political and cultural problem underpinning mainstream narratives on homelessness. The absence of data, in conjunction with the misconceptions associated with homelessness, translate into the criminalization and stigmatization of homelessness, both at the local level and in fragmented policies at national and international levels. Section one presents an overview of homelessness as a cultural and political problem; section two then introduces the Italian situation and Bologna as a case study. After a presentation of the method followed in section three, sections four and five describe and then discuss two projects initiated by a political collective in the city of Bologna that directly involve homeless people in the deconstruction of imageries and narratives around homelessness. Finally, section six draws conclusions about the need to generate new narratives capable of accounting for the intersectional and complex nature of the phenomenon of homelessness: new narratives capable of restoring to the homeless their articulate human identity.

THE POLICIES AND POLITICS OF HOMELESSNESS

Homelessness as a political and a policy problem: research challenges

Homelessness is a social crisis in our time. In the Italian context, as elsewhere across Europe, the problems of job insecurity, poverty, and energy poverty have intensified in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, worsened by a dismantling of welfare state provision and rampant housing and rental costs in a market entirely unregulated by public authorities at all levels. In this situation, more and more people are experiencing homelessness and are increasingly likely to do so in the future. According to the European Federation of National Organizations Working with the Homeless (Fédération Européenne des Associations Nationales, FEANTSA), however, the incidence of homelessness was already rising before the pandemic (FEANTSA, 2018).

The challenge of homelessness begins from a definitional problem, as homelessness is in itself a complex concept with manifold drivers and consequences. That definitional problem, this paper will argue, starts from a critical misconception about homelessness, in conjunction with a cultural problem stemming from the criminalization of poverty and the many stereotypes associated with homelessness itself. In the fall of 2022, in order to restore to homeless people their stratified and complex identity as individuals and humans, the political collective Làbas in Bologna co-designed a photographic exhibition with homeless people themselves. In the project, homeless people were given cameras which they could use to picture their own everyday lives and what they deemed relevant, whether on the street or in their lived spaces – in contrast to their portrayal in most narratives on standard media as living exclusively on the street. The project culminated in a public opening of the exhibition at which the photographers were invited to present their work. Before presenting

the Bologna context and the work of Làbas, however, the paper will introduce the international and national framework on homelessness, the major problems related to norms and approaches to homelessness, and the stigmas that have led to the criminalization of homelessness and poverty.

FEANTSA, the European Federation of National Associations Working with the Homeless, has developed a classification called ETHOS, which identifies thirteen indicators for the framing of homelessness. According to the ETHOS classification, three key components contribute to habitation; in their absence, a significant housing issue arises, potentially leading to the complete exclusion of homeless individuals from housing. To establish full habitability, specific criteria must be fulfilled: first, sufficient living space (or dwelling) where an individual and their family can assert exclusive rights (the physical aspect); second, the ability to maintain satisfactory and private relationships within that space (the social aspect); and third, possession of legal title that grants complete enjoyment (the legal aspect). In the absence of these conditions, four aspects of homelessness can be identified –aspects which nevertheless equally underpin the absence of real housing: first, homeless people; second, people living in conditions of housing insecurity; third, people without a home; and fourth, people living in inadequate housing conditions (FEANTSA 2005).

While the most radical problem affecting homeless people is that of being without a home, the housing crisis itself – the crisis in the affordability and availability of housing – is just one driver of homelessness, which goes beyond the mere provision of housing to embrace multiple dimensions of social vulnerability. For this reason, the Italian Federation of Organizations for Homeless People (fio.PSD, Federazione Italiana Organismi per le Persone Senza Dimora) has produced a more thorough definition of homelessness, identifying homeless people as subjects experiencing both material and immaterial poverty and bearing the burden of a complex, dynamic, and multifaceted discomfort that extends beyond mere primary needs to encompass the entire sphere of an individual's necessities and expectations, especially concerning their relational, emotional, and affective aspects (fio.PSD, nd).

This definition provides an understanding of homelessness as an intersectional phenomenon, whereby ethnicity, gender, a person's legal status, mental health, and other social and/or identity-based factors (Cho et al. 2013) all play a role in the exclusion of many homeless people from housing policies and from welfare measures. The reverse is also true, meaning that being homeless is also the driver of other major forms of exclusion, as well as a source of critical factors which affect a person's wellbeing. The World Health Organization (WHO) in fact lists access to housing as one of the "social determinants of health": this comprehensive notion encompasses various factors influencing human health and wellbeing. Besides housing, these determinants include income, education, employment and job stability, working conditions, food security, early childhood development, social integration and equality, structural challenges, and access to affordable healthcare services (Swope and Hernández 2019; WHO, nd).

The aggravated implication of this intersectionality is that, in the best case, policy measures fail to account for the manifold dimensions that need to be addressed when tackling such a layered crisis. In the worst case, this intersectionality may multiply and magnify systemic violence – as posited by Goodling (2020, p. 834):

> Survival activities, including sleeping, eating, sitting, and urinating, result in citations and fines, evictions and arrests, loss of property and trauma. Shelters and recovery programs are full, and represent little more than an extension of the carceral system.

Another layer of complexity is provided by the lack of consistent and coherent available data. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has maintained its affordable

housing database for some time, monitoring accessibility to the housing market, the construction sector, and policies for public and social housing with the aim of assessing housing inequalities across the globe (OECD 2024). The data is broken down into several categories, with indicators for housing as market, housing as consumption, housing and the macro economy, housing as investment, housing and the environment, and housing and governance (OECD 2024). There is a discrepancy, however, between the datasets shown in the OECD dashboard and the policy focuses of the organization, one of which is that of homelessness, for which data is not showing in the dashboard. This is a political choice indeed, although not imputable to OECD directly, but rather to the majority of countries worldwide. The OECD has covered the topic in numerous documents and reports showing available data, but these data show significant discrepancies and are therefore hard to aggregate and to compare. Many countries have not updated research on homelessness for years, or have done so with very little homogeneity, as data collection may vary in the level of detail or methodology, or even in the data-collection entity from one city to another.

This lack of standardization can thus be noted at an international level, where no homogeneous definition exists (OECD 2021), as well as within national boundaries, where different agencies and bodies have different focuses on different aspects of homelessness (Sullivan 2023). This, in turn, affects the way in which National policies for homelessness are designed: the fragmentation of information and data leads to fragmented actions, empty statements, and emergency measures that address the problem only when it becomes most evident – that is, in winter, when extra beds are provided in shelters.

Pleace et al. (2018) have observed the different services provided in sixteen EU countries, noting not only that definitions are heterogeneous, but that, as a consequence, approaches to tackling homelessness are very diverse, with most addressing the problem only from an emergency viewpoint. Temporary housing and emergency shelters remain the main focus of policies (especially at the urban level), while prevention and reintegration (through anti-eviction programs or 'housing first' projects, for instance) are largely absent from the discourse.

Homelessness as a cultural problem

The definitional problem on the one hand and the failure to account for the intersectionality of homelessness on the other are interlinked by a commonly encountered cultural problem that is underpinned by collective perceptions of homelessness. This raises a twofold issue: the first is that most nomenclatures are inadequate to account for the complexity of the phenomenon, resulting in definitional discrepancies which, in turn, produce fragmented and ineffective policy actions on homelessness. Sullivan, for instance, has observed (2023, p. 735) that:

> employing a narrow definition focuses only on visible and less common forms of homelessness, making it simpler for service providers and advocates to achieve stated goals and end homelessness according to the definition.

Not only does homelessness vary greatly in its conceptual articulation from a normative viewpoint, but cultural differences across country underpin these juridical and definitional variations. In some cases, these differences have been noted in longitudinal studies within the same country, as in the United States, where perceptions of homelessness between 1990 and 2016 varied greatly, with people showing more compassion and greater support toward federal action today compared to thirty years before (Tsai et al. 2017). Harsher dispositions toward homeless people are noted, for instance, in countries such as Poland and France, according to a multinational survey conducted in France, Ireland, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden by Petit et al. (2019). In the study, people demonstrated an overall reluctance to pay more taxes for the provision of shelters

and emergency services to homeless people, while believing that the state should be responsible for the provision of those very services.

The second and more significant dimension of the phenomenon of homelessness, however, is the mirroring of identity between the self-perceptions of the homeless and others' perceptions of homelessness and its causes. With reference to perceptions of the self, homelessness results in the inability of most people either to recall their former self without trauma, to value their present, and/or to imagine their future. The major challenge in self-perceptions and identities for homeless people consists of a dichotomy between actual, enacted, and ascribed identities, such that the stigma and misconceptions related to the condition of homelessness become grafted onto their former identities as individuals (Parsell 2011). "Homelessness poses identity problems; positive former identities are preserved, current identity is devalued, and future identities are glimpsed" (Boydell et al. 2000, p. 30). These identity problems also take the form of coping strategies which may be problematic. Developing new identities as homeless people may serve as a survival strategy on the street, while at the same time it undermines the attempts to exit from this identity and from life on the street (Johnson et al. 2008).

With reference to general perceptions of homelessness, a study on the United States and Australia in 2020 showed that a near-majority of respondents (48 percent) believed that homeless people remain homeless by choice (Batterham 2020). In another study by Tsai et al. (2019), people were asked about the perceived causes of homelessness; while structural causes such as the economic system and the lack of a strong welfare state were indicated by the majority of the respondents, responses also pointed to homeless people's own responsibility: 62 percent believed that their own irresponsible behavior was the cause, and almost 42 percent believed it was laziness on the part of the homeless themselves.

As will be also shown later with respect to the Italian case specifically, another significant cultural issue related to perceptions on homelessness is urban security (Busch-Geertsema, Giss 2006). A study by Paraschiv (2012, p.231) showed that, in Bucharest, "41.27 percent of the [interviewed] residents feeling insecure consider homelessness as a main reason of local insecurity, which included the lack of homeless people's personal hygiene.

The notion of homeless people as being willingly on the street and giving rise to a similar sense of insecurity leads to the most controversial consequence: what Goodling has called "the criminalization and stigmatization of poverty" (Goodling 2020, p.834). Within this framework, hostile architecture is built to prevent people sitting, lying down, and sleeping in public spaces (Petty 2016), while the law is enforced by local authorities to push people out of public spaces for the supposed *decorum* of the city. Here, again, the vagueness of legislation and of definitions allows policymakers to hide the real drivers and rationales of laws aimed explicitly at discriminating against and criminalizing homeless people. As specified by Doherty et al. (2008, p.292),

> while legislation is sometimes enacted with homeless people in mind, the homeless are infrequently the explicit target; nevertheless the impact is disproportionately felt by homeless people because of their reliance on public space for conducting their day-to-day activities.

HOMELESSNESS IN ITALY AND BOLOGNA

In 2019, an article by Giorgio Sturlese Tosi was published in the Italian magazine *Panorama*, headlined "Beggar Italy: beggars, real and fake, multiply, and the regulations and fines of our mayors are of no use. Our journey into insecurity." This is but one of many infamous testimonies to how homeless people are viewed on a national level in mainstream media in Italy. In November 2023, the far-right party Lega

asked the mayor of Pescara to "chase those homeless who refuse to be helped" (Il Centro 2023), while the Minister for Security denounced the "social emergency" of the proliferation of homelessness. As has been already noted in other studies, the "willingness to receive support" is of particularly crucial importance in cultural terms, but it has acquired a particular importance in Bologna, where the political collective Làbas has worked with homeless people on projects aiming to rewrite the narrative on homelessness and on the identity of people living and sleeping on the streets.

In Italy, homeless people, regarded as dangerous outcasts to be chased away and as relentlessly dirtying the streets despite the noble efforts of public authorities to maintain urban decorum, have become anonymous enemies infesting the streets. The problem of homelessness in Italy is indeed hard to quantify, and consequently to address: in 2022, the Italian Office for National Statistics (ISTAT) published research reporting that almost 96,000 people living in Italy were homeless (ISTAT 2022); the last available report before this date was in 2015. Bologna, the location of the present study, has one of the highest populations of homeless people of Italy's cities, with more than five hundred people without a proper home. The study provided by ISTAT, however, was not focused on homeless people and therefore only provides aggregate information. The only specific research available on homeless people broken down by city dates back to 2012, when more than one thousand people were reported to be homeless in Bologna (Di Leonardo 2012).

As emergency measures are stitched and patched to urban policies to prevent people sleeping on the street, structural measures that tackle the causes of homelessness are largely absent from the public debate and the political agenda. One of these is the urban banning order or DASPO *(Divieto di Accedere alle manifestazioni sportive,* ban on access to sporting events), a measure initially intended for sports events which has progressively been used by police forces and local administrations to restrict homeless people's access to the city center and public spaces (Avvocato di Strada, nd). Violent measures against homeless people are not limited to restrictions on access: many episodes of violence have been reported of homeless people being burned or beaten to death. In Verona, Padova, Genova, Trieste, and many other Italian cities (Birolini 2024), acts have been enforced (in Trieste it was called the "anti-hobo ordinance") (Il Fatto Quotidiano 2016) that evicted shelters, created dedicated ghettoes in isolated urban fringes, or deprived homeless people of their "fictitious residence." This refers to a legal measure implemented by municipalities in Italy that allows homeless people to claim a nonexistent residential address to ensure access to basic services.

Discourses on homelessness in the city of Bologna: a scenario of political incoherence
The city of Bologna has been led since 2021 by the liberal left, under the leadership of Mayor Matteo Lepore. According to Lepore, his victory was the victory of "the most progressive city in Italy." This slogan is recalled by Ruggieri (2022) in an article which reflects on a most ambiguous coincidence: on the day when Bologna was dubbed the most liveable city in Italy by *Il Sole 24 ore* (Casadei, Finzio 2020), the occupants were brutally evicted from a vacant building they were using for housing purposes because of the dramatic housing crisis in the city. These contradictions persist, as flagship projects and initiatives by the current city leadership claim to increase accessibility and equity in the city, but result in further marginalization for the poorer fringes. For homeless people, of course, no exceptions are made.

In Bologna, in fact, measures that criminalize homeless people and push them out of urban spaces are also enforced by the local police authority – although, predictably, no official figures exist on their frequency. During the period of activity of the Staffette Solidali organized by the political collective Làbas (see section four), in the first three months of 2021 alone, two people asked for help because they had been fined for "causing serious traffic obstruction" (as reported by the activists). Another organization working to provide legal support for homeless people, Street Attorney (Avvocato di Strada, founded by the lawyer, politician and activist Antonio Mumolo), writes in its 2017 report:

> He [the homeless person] did not think he was bothering anyone and was only thinking about how to leave that situation when one night he was awakened by the police officers who handed him a removal order, the so-called urban DASPO, a new measure that treats people living on the street not as a social problem but as nuisance subjects to be chased away (Avvocato di Strada 2017, p. 12).

Shelters provide approximately four hundred beds, covering less than 40 percent of the number of people in need of a place for the night. In 2015, the municipality activated the 'Piano Freddo' or 'plan, strategy' facility, providing two hundred additional beds in the months from December to March – meaning that these beds are not available during the rest of the year (Comune di Bologna, nd). This number has never been stabilized, and the municipality continues to consider this operation an 'emergency measure' rather than a structural provision for a structural issue.

Within a very short space of time (from July 2022 to April 2023, the period of observation of the present study), seven homeless people have died in Bologna of various causes, as reported both by activists in the chatrooms of Làbas and in the newspapers. The way in which these tragic events were narrated speaks not only of loneliness and poverty, but, once again, criminalizes homeless people and even blames them for "not being willing to receive help." One member of the Bologna emergency services reportedly said "We couldn't save him. We were never able to establish a relationship with Mario – it is a two-sided process, in his case marginality has won" (Capelli 2022). Lepore himself declared about the same person's death that "Some refuse to be taken in, we understand that this person, who reportedly told our operators that his name is Mario, has not accepted overnight hospitalization on a few occasions" (Orlandi 2022). The same refusal appears in an article about the death of Piermario, frozen to death on Bologna's central street, Via Rizzoli: "the homeless had refused multiple times to go to shelters."

This perception is epitomized in a recurring expression which, together with the word "invisible" (Rizzo 2023), is regularly twinned with the term "homeless": "die-hard" (*irriducibili* in the Italian discourse). The national newspaper headlined an article dedicated to the Bologna-based NGO, Piazza Grande, "A hot meal or shoes. A night with Piazza Grande among the die-hard homeless" (Mazzanti 2022). The stereotype of the "die-hard homeless" figures in an institutional video posted on the social media profiles of the mayor himself: in January 2022, in a campaign about the 'Piano Freddo' or 'plan, strategy' which provides extra beds for homeless people during the winter, the mayor filmed a video clip with the municipal emergency unit,[1] which tours the city by car to monitor the situation of the homeless and in some cases accompanies them to shelters. In that video, the mayor naïvely asks why people would not want to go to shelters. The social worker replies that:

> They have difficult stories, they struggle to talk about it, the motivations for living in the street are multifarious, never related to a single rupture; after many years on the street it is hard for these people to reconstruct their identity.

She then adds that:

> 90 people live on the street now. 70 of them is what we call 'the die-hards,' who do not want to get help.

A counternarrative to the video was provided a few days later by the political collective Làbas.

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1   The video appears on the mayor's Instagram page: https://www.instagram.com/tv/CYn_GEch_N1/?

The political collective Làbas: political imaginaries and agonistic actions in the city

Formed in 2012 from the occupation of an abandoned military barracks in the heart of the city of Bologna, the collective Làbas soon became a social infrastructure (Klinenberg 2018) and a reference point in the city. It provided a freely accessible public space and a self-organized shelter, as well as hosting local markets and services for marginalized people (including after-school support for children and Italian-language classes for migrants). In 2017, the space was violently evicted by the DIGOS, the general investigations and special operations division of the police; but the tumultuous uprising which followed that operation, with thousands of people crowding the streets of Bologna calling for Làbas to be reopened, led to negotiations with the municipality. Làbas is now hosted in another central space in the city, close to a school and a public library for children (Santagata 2018; Giannini, Pirone 2019). In 2018, right after the reopening of Làbas, the Laboratorio di Salute Popolare (Popular Health Lab) was created. The Lab was founded with the twofold purpose of reflecting on the social determinants of health on the one hand, and providing a radical answer, on the other, to the needs of those lacking the legal status or the financial means to access the national healthcare system in Italy – migrants, homeless people, asylum-seekers, low-income families. In 2022, the collective's first data-collection process showed that 250 people had accessed the Lab to receive dental, psychological, or medical care from volunteer doctors and nurses (LSP 2023).

In 2020, as the pandemic struck and all services for homeless people were shut down, no alternative provision of support was conceived for those sleeping on the street. At that point, Làbas organized the so-called Staffette Solidali or solidarity relays. The city was divided into areas covered by groups of Staffette, ranging from four to six members, one of them a volunteer doctor or nurse from the Popular Health Lab. The groups, meeting in and leaving from Làbas, toured the city on bikes with their panniers and the riders' backpacks filled with packaged food and hot tea. If needed, medical assistance was provided, but the emphasis was placed less on healthcare than on care in a broader sense: stories were listened to, people could chat to one another, and tea was shared as the volunteers spent time with the homeless. Additionally, support was provided to homeless people on how to find care services and facilities in the city. This dimension was crucial, as Làbas insists that it is not a charity, but aims to promote self-affirmation for the people it supports.

The activities of Staffette Solidali and the political pressure they created have led to material support for homeless people not only during Covid-19 times, but in the immediate aftermath of the pandemic. After three years of activity, a shelter operating during the daytime was also opened; this, for instance, allows people working night shifts to sleep during the daytime (Bologna Today, 2023).

Thus two dimensions overlap in the Làbas operations. One is reflexive and self-reflexive, aimed at the production of new political imageries for an alternative city – an alternative welfare and a new idea of care; the other is the enactment of such imageries within the spaces in which Labas operates and in the services which they provide (Morea, Sabatini 2022).

In the agonistic relationship that they entertain with the institutional governance of the city, Làbas is imagining an alternative city and benchmarking it against the current one. Their narrative is in fact a counternarrative, aiming to deconstruct ideological discourses and stereotypical narratives like those on homelessness in order to give agency back to the people who are targeted by these narratives and stereotypes. Two particular initiatives will be described in this research work in sections four and five, after a brief presentation of method in section three.

METHOD

The research presented here stems from ethnographic and auto-ethnographic research activities. The author, in her capacity as a Làbas activist and a researcher in the field, used participant observation while taking part in the activities of the Staffette Solidali, the political assemblies of the Popular Health Lab, and the creative initiatives to be described below that deconstruct the narratives of

homelessness in the city of Bologna. The work is thus grounded in cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) (Julkunen 2011). CHAT allows "researchers to analyze complex and evolving […] practices and practitioners to engage in reflective research" (Foot 2014, p.329). It thus overcomes the dualism between activism and research in a way which does not erase the conflicting interactions between these two components, but rather embeds research in both the social and the political spheres, and also accounts for the complex coexistence of contradictions in activist practices. Because of its self-reflexive nature and its thorough understanding of the interconnectedness of psychological drivers, socioeconomic motifs, and practical tools, many recent applications of CHAT have been associated with autoethnography (Yu 2022; Sánchez-Martín 2020).

In particular, CHAT is based on the concept of activity systems. These, according to Foot (2014), are articulated into six components. All six of these components will be observed in relation to the projects observed: (1) a subject (or actor), (2) an object (a desired outcome), (3) the tool(s) employed by the actor to act on the focal object to pursue a desired outcome. The remaining three components are (4) a "community of significant others", (5) the rules that regulate it, and (6) the division of labor.

TWO COUNTERNARRATIVES OF HOMELESSNESS IN BOLOGNA

Project 1: There are no die-hards

The day after the mayor posted his video on the emergency unit vehicle, Làbas organized a public assembly to discuss how to respond to the criminalization of people who, living on the street, supposedly did not want to get help. The response was to this initiative was the result of a coordinated effort between the activists and the people who were addressed in the video as 'die-hards'. The spaces of Làbas are, in fact, lived by homeless and other vulnerable people who came into contact with the collective through the Staffette Solidali and who engage in the mutualistic activities that the collective organizes. It was therefore decided that the activists would provide the introductory framework for a series of interviews in which homeless people would report their experience in the shelters which they supposedly did not want to enter.

Here is the introduction provided by the activists:

> In recent days, we have noted that the Mayor of Bologna took to the streets with the Mobile Unit. However, a distorted narrative has been presented regarding the complex reality faced by homeless individuals. In our view, there are no irreducible individuals, nor are there people who refuse to access city services. There are certainly individuals experiencing complex situations, and there is a service incapable of accommodating the complexity of each individual's circumstances among those living on the streets. A service that is often inaccessible to those who seek to utilize it.

Snapshots from the interviews are illustrated in the two figures below. Faces were left out by mutual consent –not only to preserve the interviewees' privacy, but because, as the caption accompanying the video on social media stated:

> This is our response to the simplistic and accusatory narrative of the 'irreducible.' In this video, you won't find faces, only bodies and voices. Not because we don't want to show our faces (we do that every day), but because we want to recognize ourselves as a collective and not as individuals.

The quotes that follow are taken from the eight-minute video, describing the situation of people accessing the shelters:

When you enter, they tell you many things – 'you cannot bring this, you cannot bring that', but the social worker didn't say a word to the guy sleeping next to me with a wine bottle.

They say you should lower your tone at 10pm, but there is music and wine until after midnight: a war.

I went there, but there were drug dealers everywhere.

They tell you there is room in dormitories. But when I called them on Friday night, they asked me a hundred thousand questions and then told me I could try the following week – probably Friday.

I work overnight. You can only access dormitories from 7pm, but how can you then go to work? And where do you sleep after your shift? You either lose your job and go to the dormitory, or sleep on the street.
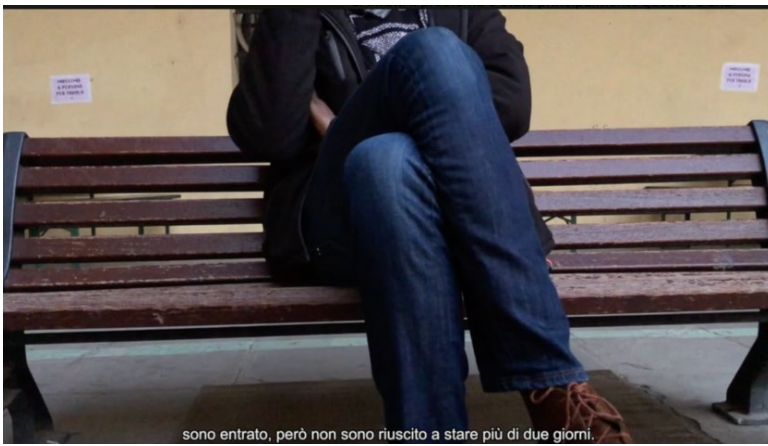
Figs. 1 and 2: are shots taken from a clip in which homeless people were interviewed about their experience of shelters in the city of Bologna

Project 2: How can you see someone on the ground every day and not ask them 'how are you doing'?
The second project took place after the end of the Staffette Solidali initiative on the street. The project had gained significant public attention, to the point of featuring in national and international magazines (Gainsforth 2021). During the first two "editions," covering the period from October to May every year for three years, from 2020 to 2022, the Staffette had been accompanied by professional photographers. At the end of the last season of the Staffette, in the fall of 2022, the decision was taken to assign the task of picturing the streets to the people who live on them. Rather than "celebrating" the work of Staffette, the aim was to hand over to homeless people the possibility to self-express their creativity – and to choose where to train the focal lens of their identity discourse and their political claims.

Four homeless people were given disposable cameras for a month in May 2023, then gave them back to Làbas to have the film developed. Some of the pictures showed intimate, personal scenes portraying friends and meals; others focused on vacant buildings that were serving housing purposes, or police patrols on the street. They were exhibited in the spaces of Làbas during a public opening followed by a public assembly. Not only were the pictures displayed in the courtyard, but homeless people provided their own captions, description, and reflections, and they were later invited to provide a short introduction to their work at the public meeting.

Figs. 3 and 4: are shots taken during the exhibition held at Làbas at the end of the photographic project. Figure 3 shows one of the exhibition panels in the courtyard, with photos accompanied by a quote by one of the authors saying "How can you see a person on the ground every day without asking how they are?"; Figure 4 shows the choice by activists and authors of the photos to display

DISCUSSION

According to the activity system analysis proposed by CHAT, the six elements in the interconnected system can be isolated here to observe how Làbas was able to construct a counternarrative:

1. **Subjects**: The subjects were here of a mixed nature, as they could not be reduced either to the activists alone or to the homeless themselves. The activists in fact aimed to attribute agency to the homeless by providing them with the factual tools to testify about their experiences in the shelters and to express their identity through photographs; and the homeless people involved would not have received a platform for their voices to resonate without the involvement of activists in the deconstruction of the stereotypical infrastructure in which narratives on homelessness are embedded. CHAT allows us to overcome the social distinction between diverse actors and identify them as subjects. This unification can also be framed in what Manzini calls a "community of practice," which encompasses the differences between the agents involved in the light of a shared design purpose (Manzini 2015).

2. **Object:** The desired outcome of the action – the focal object – was the deconstruction of narratives on homelessness. This outcome, in turn, had a twofold ramification. On the one hand, the objective was to retrace the complex identities and factors which underpin homelessness, restoring to homeless people their identity; on the other, the aspiration was to produce more accessible and equitable services for these people, capable of addressing their needs and progressively mitigating the many interconnected issues related to homelessness.

3. **Tools:** The tools were both conceptual and factual; they were material and virtual. The tools included the 'services' which Làbas has provided over time, from the Staffette Solidali to the Popular Health Lab, and they point to a rewriting of the narrative of the effectiveness of the welfare services, which end up being exclusive and inaccessible to the very population they are expected to serve. Among the tools were the video co-produced with homeless people, where interviews disclosed the unbearable conditions to which the homeless are subject in the shelters, and the photographic project, which allowed homeless people to show their own reality and to choose the focal lens to apply to their own identity.

4. **Community of significant others:** Foot (2014, p.330), following Engeström (1990), defines this component as "the people who share with the subject an interest in and involvement with the same object." He adds: "the interactions between the subject and the community that engages a shared object can be thought of as the 'communicative relations' of the activity." In this respect, the many organizations orbiting around Làbas and supporting its work and services – that is, other political collectives in the city – can be seen as supporters; the municipal authorities, the media, and the welfare services, as the agonistic targets of the communication, can be seen as the significant others involved in the communicative relations produced by Làbas, which thus challenges the mainstream discourse on homelessness produced by these significant others.

5. **Rules:** The rules underpinning the development of the projects were the same rules that underpin every activity of the political collective. The public assembly is the main space in which to discuss ideas and operationalize them; people act on a voluntary basis, and the involvement of homeless people was also dependent on their willingness to photograph and be photographed.

6. **Division of labor:** Làbas is intended to be a mutualistic space. Therefore, the activities which led to the two project outcomes were not led by the collective alone, but shared by the participants equally, meaning not that everyone shared the same amount of work, but rather that each participant was engaged in the activities according to their willingness and ability to work on the projects. Both homeless people and activists edited the interviews for the video, selected the photographs, designed the exhibition space, and took part in the organization of the assembly which followed.

CONCLUSIONS

Homelessness is a multifaceted and complex issue, where different factors of fragility overlap. To name only two aspects, those who experience homelessness experience on the one hand the denial of the right to housing – pivotal to the social determinants of health, with all the attendant implications for their relational health and on work opportunities – and on the other, the denial of their very identity. This is because there is both a political and a cultural problem related to the perception of homelessness: homelessness becomes an umbrella concept which seems to erase all the complex interconnected factors which lead to the loss of a home for individuals, while being associated with stereotypes that criminalize homeless and vulnerable groups at large. This results in fragmented and anachronistic definitions, in inconsistent data and, consequently, in inadequate policy measures.

Commonly held views, as demonstrated both in the research literature and in policymakers' strategies of marginalization, reflect the belief that homeless people are incapable of emerging from their condition, partly or entirely because of their own unwillingness to be helped, and who are responsible for their own situation because of mental issues and/or laziness.

There is an urgent need to act, at both the political and the cultural level, to deconstruct these views, on the one hand, and to provide reliable qualitative and quantitative data on the other that can account for the complexity of homelessness and the many identities that inhabit this concept. This is matched by the urgent need for policy, at both national and local level, to redesign not just sustainable housing policies which can take into account the intersectional factors underpinning poverty, but also social services which are able to provide more than barely sufficient measures and services to mitigate the crisis of homelessness. Even in supposedly progressive contexts like the city of Bologna, the newspapers and even the mayor himself portrays homeless people as "die-hards" who refuse to access the services provided by the city.

Làbas has deconstructed stereotypical imageries of homelessness through both discursive and factual actions: on the one hand, by creating services which trained a spotlight on the inadequacy of those provided by the city itself, and on the other, by restoring agency to homeless people themselves as they exposed the conditions in the shelters (through a video with interviews) and expressed their own creative and political views and identity through a photographic inquiry and the exhibition that followed.

From a policy viewpoint, the stigma of poverty and homelessness needs to be urgently addressed. Grounded as it is in cultural as well as sociological premises, this stigma can be also attributed to a lack of policies which structurally address the matter of housing vulnerability, doing no more than patch up the problem with temporary and emergency solutions, rather than preventive policies such as anti-eviction programs or welfare measures such as 'housing first' programs. The Bologna case attests that this stigma has now largely penetrated the institutional discourse, with even workers in services for the homeless labelling the people living on the street as "die-hards". The two political and cultural levels, therefore, systematically subtract agency from homeless people, depriving them both of their identities and of the tools with which to build a new one.

Through its contribution to both the discourse on homelessness and to action to mitigate its effects on people's wellbeing, the initiatives taken by Làbas exemplify how homeless people can become an active part of the process of deconstructing the imagery of homelessness, and providing homeless people with the means and tools with which to express their own truth and identity. Agency, enabled through actual participation, is a necessary prerequisite for the design of policies and services which actually address the needs of those they are supposed to serve. At the same time, the relational practice underpinning the whole process renders these projects more than a mere exercise of style: they are the culmination of a long process, based on trust and reciprocity,

which challenges the conventional model of aid, in which homeless individuals are granted a service out of charity.

However powerful, these actions are still few and far between. A broader uptake is urgently called for – from research, from policy, and from activists – to shape the discourse on the housing crisis and on homelessness.

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