Political Consumerism for the Energy Transition and Collaborative Housing: Two Experimental Cases in Italy

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Abstract

The essay proposes an in-depth analysis of two Italian case studies, that are interweaving new forms of collaborative housing and energy prosumption sharing. They were both born and implemented before Italian legislation on cohousing and energy communities took effect. In terms of domestic life and energy management, they entail real experiments in sharing spaces, times, and activities. These initiatives took place in different parts of the country with different economic and cultural characteristics.Within the theoretical framework of political consumerism, we analyze the community dimension and action of these initiatives in relation to citizen/customer engagement in energy transition processes.

Keywords: Political consumerism; collaborative housing; energy community; energy transition; energy citizenship

Introduction

This essay examines two Italian case studies in detail as examples of intertwined forms of collaborative housing and energy sharing. Energy communities and cohousing were conceived and partially implemented before Italian legislation was passed. Therefore, they are real experiments in terms of how spaces, times, and activities are shared in the context of home living, and energy management.These two case studies represent two experimental models of collaborative housing and grassroots energy initiatives that could be adapted to different socioeconomic and cultural contexts.The two projects were undertaken in two different geographical areas of Italy: one in Northern Italy, and the other in the South, two geographical areas with different economic, social, and cultural characteristics and contexts.

In the first case, a bottom-up participatory process was used, in which group members participated in all stages of the project, from the conception phase to the design of the building, from the choice of materials and technologies used to construct it to the rules and relational dynamics to be applied within the cohousing community. The second is a pilot project conducted by an NGO to promote housing empowerment from a community perspective. People with social integration and poverty problems

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are involved. A participative process was also envisaged here, especially concerning housing management and the rules for establishing a small energy community.

These two cases are relevant because they represent new social movements that, through their energy and housing consumption choices, the use of renewable energy and energy-efficient and energy-saving technologies, lead the actors involved in their daily actions to contribute to climate change mitigation. They comprise new forms of collective energy engagement, including strong political action, that contribute to shaping energy citizenship. What seems to be relevant in the strategies implemented in these experiences relates first to the logic of climate change mitigation. Indeed, although they have important differences, both cases of communal living experiment with strategies to change the lifestyles and living of their members (Bouchard 2006). This choice is characterised as a mitigation action and not just an adaptation to the current climate crisis, as it involves domestic practices related to consumption (energy, housing, space, etc.) in terms of their transformation and social reproduction starting from neighbourhood relations. The effectiveness of this strategy with regard to the consequences of climate change is entrusted to the community dimension, that underlies the two initiatives. This strategy is also adapted in relation to the characteristics of the group of co-habitants and their ecological, economic, cognitive, social and relational capital (Moulaert & Nussbaumer 2014). It is also possible to implement a form of climate change mitigation by engaging health and socio-economically vulnerable people and making them beneficiaries (Sovacool et al. 2021; Jenkins et al. 2016), as in the case of social co-housing in Southern Italy. Importantly, the logic of the community approach also allows practices and specific consumption solutions to be adapted to the diversity of territorial and local contexts, through the grafting of forms of situated social innovation (Bouchard 2012) and a practical social learning approach (Moulaert et al. 2013). Our research examined the social dynamics generated by these initiatives and the community dimension. Using political consumerism as a theoretical framework, we investigated how citizens/customers engage with environmental and energy transition processes.

The following paragraphs introduce our definition of collaborative housing and energy communities and the current Italian situation regarding the diffusion and territorial concentration of these kinds of communities. We then discuss the theoretical framework of political consumerism that can help us better understand the social phenomenon under research and the dynamics of its transformation. The Methodology section describes the two case studies and explains our qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews, life stories, and socio-ethnographic observation. In the Results and Discussion section, our focus is on the different features of each case corresponding to two different models of community-based initiatives in the field of living and energy and their political subjectivity. The final section is dedicated to some relevant implications derived from our analysis to highlight how these two experimental cases connected to civil society movements can represent best practices in the energy transition.

1.1 Collaborative Housing, Energy Communities and Energy Transition: The Situation in Italy

In our definition of collaborative housing, we include those forms of living that combine the presence of individual flats with shared spaces (i.e., garden, kitchen) and activities or facilities (i.e., laundry, babysitting, car-sharing). Denmark pioneered this model of living in the 1960s, spreading throughout Northern European countries (Lietart 2007) and other countries (United States, Australia, Japan) over time.

Sharing space, time, and resources (skills, availability of time, and expertise of various kinds) is one of the basic principles of cohousing, as well as rationalizing consumption and avoiding waste. Thus, collaborative living initiatives are born of a strong commitment to environmentally sustainable living. Hence, we agree with the definition of cohousing: a form of housing that emphasizes economic, environmental, and social sustainability (Bianchi 2020, 9).

Italy has fewer collaborative living initiatives than other European countries and other continents. Moreover, no specific law has yet been promulgated at the national level. These experiences are, however, attracting the attention of citizens' associations, local authorities, and national governments. They have therefore become an emerging social and political phenomenon, playing an increasingly significant role in triggering climate change policies and actions. Those who live in collaborative housing also desire to feel part of a community that nurtures well-being in terms of quality of life, relationships, and better management of their day-to-day lives. It is not just the welfare that these initiatives generate that impacts the people living in the homes but also the surrounding context, such as the neighborhood.

Through a partnership between the public administration and the promoters of these initiatives, collaborative housing can be seen as a service to the city, as it allows social networks to be formed and solidarity-based initiatives to be initiated, as well as to support and promote urban regeneration processes. Especially in the center and north of the country, top-down and bottom-up initiatives have multiplied in the past decade. According to data from the website "Mappa dei cohousing in Italia," published by Housing Lab (Housing Lab, n.d.), 28 cohousing units were already inhabited in 2022. As mapped by the Housing Lab association, most cohousing and ecovillage projects are in Northern Italy, while just a few are in the South.

Concerning energy communities, they represent a significant phenomenon of decentralisation of governance in the energy field. In addition, an innovative consumption practice based on participatory models with consequent positive impacts on the ecological and energy transition. According to Seyfang et al. (2013, 978), energy communities are "projects where communities (of places, or of interest) exhibit a high degree of ownership and control of the energy project, as well as benefiting collectively from the outcomes (either energy-saving or revenue-generation)." They may involve different actors and interest groups: citizens to local authorities, NGOs to companies. This is certainly leading to a momentous change in the energy system, as it gives people the right to generate, store, consume and sell their own energy. Consumers and producers of energy can then join in the form of a community to share the energy produced by the facilities held by the community.

Today, the prosumer's role has become accessible to any citizen and is consumer empowerment. He can play a key role by triggering social innovation dynamics, as he reflects a fundamental change in consumer behaviours Interaction with the grid has thus paved the way for what we could call energy 2.0. However, this model must correspond to a territory managed from a participatory perspective (Nastasi 2013) to make citizens aware of the possibility of becoming producers and more knowledgeable about the energy supply chain and its costs. In this way, the conditions for a wider participation in the decision-making process would be created. Therefore, energy communities will increasingly play a decisive role in the energy transition process, acquiring a multidimensional value and involving not simply technical reconfiguration, but substantial evolutions in changing individual behaviours, practices, processes, social interactions and values, thus generating decisive long-term impacts.

In relation to this issue, we consider energy communities as projects run by and for the benefit of a local population (Walker and Devine-Wright 2008), where communities show a high degree of ownership and control over energy production and consumption, with a collectively positive impact on the results (energy savings or income generation) (Seyfang et al. 2013). Beyond this, we consider them new forms of non-oppositional collective mobilization against renewable energy sources (Magnani 2018).

In this respect, the European Commission, within the Clean Energy Package, has set, on the one hand, the guidelines and constraints in terms of renewable energy to be achieved by 2030 for each state and, on the other, has introduced, through two directives, EU 2018/2001 (Renewable Energy Directive II, or REDII) and EU 2019/944 (the Internal Electricity Market Directive, or IEMD), two new definitions: 'Renewable Energy Community' (REC) and 'Citizen Energy Community' (CEC). In both cases, the aim is to provide environmental, economic, or social benefits to their members or the area where they operate at a community level rather than to generate financial profits. However, there are some differences between these two directives. The REC has to be powered by renewable energy of any kind. It can produce it with any energy carrier (electricity, heat, gas), while the CEC is not specified, and the energy source can also be fossil.

In Italy, the European Directive 2018/2001 was partially and experimentally transposed through the law. No. 8/2020 on 29 February 2020. Then, in 2021, it was fully transposed through the legislative decree 'Red II' (Legislative Decree No. 199 of 8 November 2021), which came into force on 15 December 2021. Based on this legislation, each energy community can have a plant with a maximum capacity of 1 Mega Watt.

Furthermore, the members of an energy community can be connected to the primary power station, which allows a larger number of people to be involved. In rural areas, for instance, more small municipalities can be involved. According to ARERA Resolution 727/2022/R/EEL, the new Italian regulations will come into force from 1 March 2023 or from the date of application of the implementing decrees of the Ministry for the Environment and Energy Security, whichever is later, and will remove the previous restrictions.According to a mapping carried out by RSE (Ricerca di Sistema Energetico) and the Luiss Business School (De Vidovich 2021), there are 27 renewable

energy communities launched in Italy in compliance with Law 8/2020. In this phase of the start-up and development of energy community projects, solidarity, and collaborative living initiatives take on the role of living lab from the viewpoint of sharing renewable energy resources in Italy.

Moreover, these forms of collaborative building can and do play a role in disseminating energy sustainability cultures and best practices. Above all, intentional communities, such as ecovillages and cohousing (Daly 2017), also referred to as 'community-led housing' in a broader sense (Lang et al. 2019), are an example of bottom-up practices such as participatory governance, which links family and co-housing management to the use of community-based energy solutions. Often, these experiences lead to the development of technological innovations from renewable sources for energy production, storage, and mutualisation. Bawens and Defourny (2017) show that these practices produce benefits for the members of the cohousing/energy community (*mutual benefit*) but have great potential as social diffusers (*public benefit*) of participation knowledge and practices as they have already done for other purposes. Other scholars point out that some experiences of this type have significantly impacted the surrounding area: they have generated processes of urban regeneration and social inclusion through many activities involving the neighbourhood's inhabitants. (Tummers 2016, 2030—31).

Ruiu (2014, 324) outlines the role of these 'collaborative living' communities as a means of fostering and disseminating social capital within and outside the group.

According to Daly (2017, 1359), "intentional communities represent potentially important experiments in developing more sustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns. They are experimental niches, and as the grass-roots innovation agenda highlights, civil society niches can play an important role in successful sociotechnical transitions to more sustainable production-consumption systems."

1.2 The Political Consumerism Issue Between Living and Energy Transition

Despite the EU's massive commitment to the energy transition of its member states—both in terms of producing new policies and economic investment—the results achieved so far do not seem to be sufficient concerning the goals set by the Paris Agreements, which assume an acceleration towards EU decarbonisation by 2050.The pathways already unfolding differ greatly between countries due to the technologies and actions implemented by each of them. The countries that seem to be struggling the most are those located in Southern Europe, which were hardest hit by the economic crisis between 2007 and 2008 and which, also as a result of the political, economic, and social effects of the COVID pandemic, will certainly be forced to review their policies in support of the energy transition.

The conversion of the energy system involves transforming the socio-technical systems that represent "the infrastructure of everyday life" (The Foundational Economy Collective 2018): electricity grid, transport, construction, waste management, production, food distribution, etc. A technical apparatus that can only function if it is accompanied by social practices with specific cultural meanings, requiring new roles

and responsibilities from citizens (Lennon et al. 2020), and public engagement as a precondition for public acceptance (Devine-Wright 2007b). To face all this process's challenges we must expand beyond economic and technological investments. Instead, we must foster and promote the citizens' civic engagement, active participation, and interactions both among themselves and with institutional and/or corporate actors. In short, it promotes 'energy citizenship' processes.

In Devine-Wright's definition:

> a view of the public that emphasizes awareness of responsibility for climate change, equity and justice in relation to siting controversies as well as fuel poverty and, finally, the potential for (collective) energy actions, including acts of consumption and the setting up of community renewable energy projects such as energy cooperatives. (2007a, 72-73)

This vision that opens up novel forms of collective engagement in the energy field with a strong political connotation. It also clashes with the official discourse that views the citizen as individual actors motivated above all by economic interests. In this sense, in light of the expanding participation spaces opened by the energy transition, "energy citizenship needs to be reconceptualised to incorporate more collective and inclusive contexts for action" (Lennon et al. 2020, 184). Considering the need to analyse individual and collective behaviours that increase actions concerning both the private sphere, such as energy consumption, and the public sphere, such as citizenship practice, the more appropriate point of view is political consumerism. Consumption, for many citizens, is politically shaped. Through these actions, consumers link their choices to relevant political issues related to environmental, labour rights, human rights, and sustainable development. In practice, by politicising consumption, these people identify the economic sphere as an arena to promote new dynamics. This perspective aimes to affirm a different way of conceiving of economy and politics.

The assumption is:

> everyday conduct of individual citizens is not just a matter for private life but increasingly important from the local to the global level for politics, community, and the character of the marketplace. (...) Their choices are based on attitudes and values regarding issues of justice, fairness, or noneconomic issues that concern personal and family well-being and ethical or political assessment of favorable and unfavorable business and government practice. (Micheletti 2003, 4)

This is the general context in which forms of alternative consumption, ethical or socially responsible investment, enable citizens/consumers to undertake more responsible actions that can be defined as "politics behind products" (Michelletti 2003; Stolle et al. 2005).

In its internal articulation, political consumerism is divided into *collectivist* and *individualized* collective action. The former, according to Micheletti, represents a kind of first modernity where consumers are involved in associative interest groups, civic associations, or representative democratic structures, in which citizens find a forum for

giving voice to their political identity. In the later, according to postmodern dynamics, consumer action does not require any external structure to support their interests but is based on the individual choice of objectives and political action to be pursued, referring to values shared by others too (Micheletti 2003; Stolle & Micheletti 2013).
The possibility of using purchasing power as a form of pressure is not entirely new, even for some; the origin of this way of acting is traced back to 1773 during the Boston Tea Party protest, which contributed to triggering the American Revolution (Soper & Trentmann 2008, 5; Pellizzoni 2012),

In Europe, from the end of the 19th century— when the first consumer cooperatives were developed in Italy and Germany to contain prices— and at the beginning of the 20th century (Trentmann 2004). Citizen engagement in politics does not only refer to boycotts but also forms of *positive political consumerism.* The boycott promotes the consumption of goods following specific principles (Michelletti 2003; Stolle et al. 2005; Copeland 2014b).

In this framework, considering the market as a political arena, citizens-consumers, and proactive consumers, bring out the connection between the economic and political dimensions: environmental problems and concerns, the ethics of production, and issues in which consumption becomes an instrument of social regulation implemented by civil society.

In the case of Italy, the ethical consumption of Fair Trade goods can be considered the most important kind of political consumerism (Mostaccio 2008), from which all other types of positive political consumerism descend. Among these, the most widespread and best known is that of the Solidarity Purchasing Groups: consumer groups who intentionally choose a lifestyle based on solidarity towards the producers, the environment, the developing countries, and all inequalities under the current growth model (Mostaccio 2016; Mostaccio 2020).

Solidarity Purchasing Groups mostly arise as informal groups formed by consumers and producers who collectively organize the purchase of food or other goods and services. Solidarity Purchasing Groups, as other collective experiences, become "building sites" where new forms of economy are engendered. The purpose is to create a new "relational economy," where social exchange is as meaningful as economic exchange. Practices like these are increasingly widespread in communities of both place and interest, in which exchange is not necessarily monetary but social and political. We are dealing with a steadily growing phenomenon Since 1994 (the first SPG in Fidenza), the national network has registered 994 groups and 18 Solidarity Economy Districts, with a dozen more under construction.

> After a short time, the Solidarity Purchasing Groups merge with other organizations and create different types of experiences so they re-develop their aims and become real political players. In this way, within these groups, many initiatives with a strong political issue emerge: they act as protection, promotion and defence of the local territories as well as encouraging social engagement and connecting with other types of entities. These lead, for example, the referendum campaign for public water. (Mostaccio 2020, 212)

This kind of political consumerism is particularly relevant for our purposes because it is part of Italian renewable energy communities born from the experiences of Solidarity Purchasing Groups and Solidarity Economy Districts. Magnani and Patrucco (2018, 189) point out the they were born "within a subculture strongly oriented to issues of participation, self-management, solidarity and environmental sustainability." These experiences combine local rootedness with the energy transition to respond to the environmental issue. In this case, the statement is that consumers, as citizens, can potentially, under certain circumstances, collectively influence society's development through what they decide to buy and/or produce. This is obviously also in the energy field. Moreover, the collectivisation of these practices seems to address the concerns raised in a stimulating essay by Pellizzoni (2012), in which he argues that political consumerism, by emphasising individualised collective action, risks supporting and encouraging a certain immunisation of the members of social aggregates; where immunity (as opposed to community) implies having nothing in common with others, no obligation to them. Renewable energy communities, at least in the Italian case, seem to be undergoing a real shift from individuality towards the renaissance of the communitarian dimension.

Political consumerism has become a significant force in dealing with complex and difficult problems in different production and consumption sectors in transnational and multilevel settings (Copeland & Baulianne 2020; Gundelach 2020). It increasingly involves civil society actors engaged in activities within various social institutions at different levels of society (Copeland 2014a; Boström et al. 2019). A type of commitment that political consumers mainly direct toward material goods, despite the growing importance of the service sector. From this point of view, energy communities can represent an interesting challenge: with the reconfiguration of the electricity system due to the opening of the electricity market, consumers can no longer be passive users but can become prosumers and co-managers capable of producing different types of value.

It represents a major achievement for political consumerism in the fields of domestic energy demand and supply and the subsequent new practices of consumption (Kloppenburg & van Vliet 2013). From this perspective, renewable energy prosumerism can be considered as a social movement concerning a decentralized democratic energy model with clearly recognizable adversaries (Campos & Marín-González 2020, 10; Ruostetsaari 2020). Within this theoretical frame, we have selected two case studies that could represent some of the main trends concerning these phenomena and analysed them as possible disseminators of good practices (also) in the energy sector and two models for implementing housing and energy policies.

2. Methodology

2.1 Semi-structured Interviews and Ethnographies

To investigate the two case studies, we used a qualitative approach, mainly the collection of semi-structured in-depth interviews with the main actors involved in each

of the two collaborative living initiatives and socio-ethnographic observation. Several reasons motivated the choice of these research instruments.

First of all, the niche nature of these cohousing experiencesdoes not yet allow for a significant quantitative analysis. However, it leads one to prefer a qualitative approach that can better account for the social dynamics within the groups studied. Secondly, the community dimension and the participatory nature or involvement of the inhabitants play a central role in these experiences, both with the sharing of spaces and domestic life and with the management and consumption of renewable energy. This dimension of consumption governance and a precise vision of dwelling in a shared form needs to be explained in detail from the point of view of the main actors (inhabitants/practitioners) (Bianchi 2020, 13). Thirdly, these two initiatives have a social innovation character combined with high technological innovation, at least concerning the Italian context. This character, once again, defines these case studies in terms of niche phenomena, with respect to which are interesting and useful in understanding the perceptions, changes in behavior, and consumption of citizens/inhabitants in a domestic environment.

The social niche perspective was complemented with an ethnographic approach, strongly focused on the observation of the context and socio-cultural profile of the actors directly involved in cohousing experiences and the spatial and social environments in which experiences fall back (neighborhoods and broader territories). This makes it possible to emphasize the socio-technical configurations that innovative and experimental experiences of energy transition allow to create and prefigure possible models for different populations. Indeed, the choice of the two case studies was not pursued to make an accurate comparison but rather to analyze two different strategies to make possible a new model of sustainable living that links housing management and energy consumption to community dynamics. Thus, twelve interviews were collected with the inhabitants of the cohousing in Northern Italy (out of thirteen households) living in this settlement in 2013, adding a further five interviews after seven years (in 2020). Instead, twelve interviews were collected for collaborative housing in the South (with to practitioners and two with future inhabitants out of six). In both cases, the ethnographic approach, based on participatory observation, supported the collection of semi-structured interviews. This method is a useful strategy for building a direct interaction with the individual actors and the group to understand the dynamics, motivations, and transformative processes from an internal point of view and using the particular positioning of the researcher within the established relationships.

The interviews, once transcribed, were analyzed through a decoding template according to the thematic nodes that characterize typical political consumerism initiatives, taken as an interpretative key of the case studies, but also introducing some new features that emerged in the field research. These thematic nodes are involvement, motivations, obstacles, social and symbolic capital, knowledge, skills, learning, community dimension, trust, the role of critical consumption, political subjectivity, and replicability.

2.2 Case Studies Description

The two cohousing selected as case studies have very interesting characteristics that make them two different models of collaborative living and sharing renewable energy, starting from a community-based project. We describe their distinctive features below.

Cohousing in Northern Italy

The cohousing set up about seven years ago in Northern Italy is composed of 14 families. These families actively participate in all phases of the design of the building, energy systems, and the construction of internal self-regulation. It is, therefore, an initiative that proceeds from the voluntary action of some practitioners (a nucleus of 5 families) who already took part in some experiences of critical consumption and political commitment. They also wanted to share the goal of a community-based way of living, according to the general cohousing model that arose in Northern Europe in the 1970s. This initial group quickly extended the proposal to anyone who wanted to join in a project to be built together, starting a self-selection process that lasted about three years and led to the participatory construction of a decision-making method based on full consensus, which means that any decision is only taken if all members agree.

At the end of this period, the group started the necessary steps to implement their idea: identification of the area, identification of the design features from a technical point of view, and considering the desire to build and live in zero environmental impact houses. This aspect was very attractive to later joiners. In relation to the technical aspects, the group of co-housers had different professional and technical skills (architecture, engineering, knowledge of renewable energies), which helped them design and implement the building. The latter was designed according to bio-climatic parameters, which allowed them to achieve optimal solutions also with regard to the use of energy produced by photovoltaic panels, the introduction of air recycling systems, and the adoption of underfloor cooling/heating with the consequent preference for more performing materials. Another aspect to emphasise that is recurrent in cohousing is the sharing of common spaces and services. In this case, these include a common pantry, a washing machine and dryer, a cold room, and a common room open to neighborhood activities.

This strong community connotation centered on sharing different dimensions of daily life required special attention to the care of internal relationships. This care was driven by the idea of having to constantly building and strengthening bonds of trust, to manage conflicts, and therefore, communication and decision-making, to keep participatory dynamics and well-being at a satisfactory level. On this aspect, too, the group could count on an internal member with skills in facilitation and mediation techniques but also on an external professional who dealt more specifically with the supervision of some community dynamics.

Social Cohousing of Southern Italy

The cohousing is located in Southern Italy and is an experimental pilot project of a wider urban redevelopment intervention. The study presents different characteris-

tics in terms of the subjects that promoted its establishment and the type of actors involved, who geared energy management choices and methods toward different dynamics. The promoter and manager of this project is an NGO, in collaboration with various public and private partners who have contributed to various aspects of the design and implementation of the initiative.

Regarding the creation of the energy community, the role of the social ESCO, a spin-off of the same NGO, and the technical contribution of researchers from an institute specialized in energy technologies were central. The latter, in particular, dealt with the management of the electrical system and storage systems. The design phase dates back to 2014, while the state of implementation is still the construction of the houses and the start of the first activities of the Civic and Educational Centre, which is part of the cohousing. Indeed, the small pilot project is characterised by a varied social composition of actors.

The design phase dates back to 2014, while the construction work was completed, including the facilities, between the end of 2021 and the beginning of 2022. The houses will be handed over to the house recipients in the course of 2022. Meanwhile, the "Civic and educational centre," which is part of the cohousing and a facility to provide services to support families and children in the neighbourhood, has already been running for a couple of years. This pilot project had a diverse social composition involving several actors: the Civic and Educational Centre, which carries out promotion and education activities for children living in the neighbourhood; three people with some psychiatric problems, but who are following a path of social inclusion, each of whom will live in their own home; a household, husband and wife, with problematic socio-economic conditions. The NGO has therefore set itself the objective of promoting collaborative living experience for people with various difficulties. This again included the sharing of common spaces, activities and services, such as the garden and its maintenance, a single photovoltaic system and its shared use as a true energy community, including through the development of a storage system.

Furthermore, concerning the use and management of energy costs, the NGO is developing a calculation method called a "social algorithm," which divides energy costs, taking into account the greater or lesser degree of social and economic fragility or need of the end users, according to a mutual aid logic sealed by a community deal. This process of involvement and participatory learning on the part of the future members of the cohousing/energy community takes place with a mediation action undertaken by practitioners (educators, social workers, psychologists) who have been following them for some time on their path to social reintegration.

3. Results and Discussion

The description of the two case studies thus highlights a series of differences that set them as distinct models of living and sharing energy. These models aimed at different social categories but also at different socio-economic contexts. Furthermore, each of the two proposed case studies is placed differently from the more canonical definition of political consumerism introduced above.

In this section, we analyse their particular form of political consumerism, which emerges from the ethnographic study and the decoding of the interviews. In the end, we will detect a very strong community dimension in both experiences, which, according to our analysis, records a certain characteristic of the Italian experience.

3.1 A Collaborative Housing in Northern Italy as a Typical Example of Political Consumerism

On the one hand, cohousing in Northern Italy has features that fit perfectly within our reference category since it is a bottom-up initiative born from voluntary participatory action dictated by a strong awareness and knowledge of environmental and energy issues. Other characteristics are the following: a past political commitment of most participants; the role of this entity as an emerging entity able to dialogue with local authorities to promote sustainable lifestyles.

Regarding the participatory process, the co-housers have become active promoters of the idea and implementation of the cohousing, spending much of their time building a process of real participation. This process starts from the phase of initial idea up to its concrete realization and living in the building designed according to this particular form of intentional community. Here, we merely reconstruct of the main steps of this process:

> I am part of the first group composed by five families, who have started to look for a place when we could live close to each other and share an experience with all the aspects I was saying, such as the environmental and the relational aspects (...). So we thought to the cohousing formula, which was developed above all in the countries of northern Europe (…). Thinking about a cohousing meant expanding the base, because if we wanted to have significant common spaces and a certain type of experience, five families were not enough. So we spread our purpose among the milieu that each of us frequented (solidarity purchasing group, all of us were referring to the local political movement, environmental protection, voluntary work, Caritas, this network). Therefore, without making posters or publications, a first group was created, which was then self-selected. There was no one who said "you are fine and you are not", and the group of fourteen families was created, then this group jointly designed the cohousing regarding all aspects and then came to live there. (MC-1)

The main and, in some cases, decisive factor that led the members to start a group for the establishment of cohousing, was the opportunity to design an environmentally friendly house.

> Some families, I must say, came close especially at the beginning, for the energy aspect, because we wanted to build a condominium without CO_2 emissions, self-sufficient from an energy point of view (...). The underlying motivation derives from a sensitivity that we all have a bit towards the defense of the environment. We are all well informed about the troubles that we too have produced, all with lifestyles that are especially part of the Western world, in which we are completely immersed. (MC-1)

> On the one hand, my husband became passionate about this project due to its construction quality and energy saving. (…) The electric scooter you see below is ours. I liked this goal of not polluting, of saving energy, not destroying nature. (WC-1)

This level of awareness is, on the other hand, also the result of history, individual and collective, at least for some members, of long-standing political engagement in movements that have developed in the reference territory and that have focused on good environmental practices related to the fight against climate change.

Furthermore, alongside this political militancy, many co-housers have maintained over time their membership to solidarity purchasing groups, which in Italy have developed in recent decades a great focus on short supply chains and increasingly strong relationships with producers in the territory of proximity or more disadvantaged geographical areas. This well-structured network acts as a litmus test for another important characteristic of political consumerism experiences. This ability allows the generation of high social and relational capital to be exploited for a personal purpose and shared with the milieu to enhance the effectiveness of one's action (Bianchi 2020, 19).

> On certain issues, we were already ahead, for example the experience of solidarity purchasing groups, the issues of the economy and fair trade and other themes. This experience gave us the opportunity to affirm the same principles, also concerning the energy. This is a bit like adding an important piece to a trend that was already present. (...) Our Municipality had the sensitivity to understand that our experience is different, but also to justify a privilege in front of the citizens, it asked us to make our common room available - but we would have done it anyway - also for the activities of the neighborhood. So through this door, a good and collaborative relationship with the Municipality passed. The councilor for the environment has always been part of the political movement I was telling you about before, so for this reason he is a friend of ours, is a colleague. For this reason it was natural that he would call us into question and ask us to be present, but for us it is clearly, it is part of our objectives, so it is really a sharing of objectives. (MC-1)

> It also depends on our world, what capacity our basic world has to encourage the exchange and sharing of energy like a lure to start talking about sharing. (…) Much depends on civil society, how civil society will be able to welcome and learn about and put it into practice. There is a lot of groups operating in our areas. I think it is the task of these groups spreading out the knowledge about energy communities. We are trying to do it. Let's start at the regional level, it will be a topic of the next meetings of the Regional Coordination of the solidarity economy. Favoring this kind of initiatives means putting different subjects around the table and seeing how they can get together for development starting from this law (on energy communities in Italy) to take advan-

> tage of it and exploit it adequately. If we are able to do it, in my opinion, we will take a good step forward. (MC-2)

3.2 The Social Cohousing in Southern Italy: Towards an Environmentally Sustainable Community-welfare

Social cohousing in Southern Italy seems to be more distant from the typical model of political consumerism because its characteristics are linked to a more ambivalent participatory process. This aspect is particularly true in relation to the generation of the initiative but also for the levels of awareness and training of future members. Indeed, the manager of the NGO plays an essential role, as a strong leader, in the making of the cohousing/energy community idea, in the connection between the technological and social dimensions, in the management of the whole process (selection of members, mediation with the institutions and funders, planning of the social algorithm and business models). However, the goal is to build greater social cohesion and inclusion through an experience of sharing resources (spaces, activities, energy, water) that sets in motion mechanisms of deep change in everyday consumption behaviors.

> This idea arises from a broad need to experiment with technologies and organizational models of sustainable urban metabolism. Neighborhoods and cities are like living organisms that feed on natural resources. Energy resources and this transformation process is strongly correlated and strongly interdependent with the level of capital and social cohesion that the territories have and with their level of capability. (MSC-1)

Accordingly, the promoter has created a strong network of private and public actors who carry out different tasks based on their specific skills (scientific, technical, economic, organizational, and educational) to set up this pilot project. These actors are some Banking Foundations, Universities and Research Institutes with energy and architectural expertise, mental health services, social cooperatives, and social workers.

Despite a network of specialists motivated by a high degree of environmental and social sensitivity, the final users involved in a path of social and labour integration that has already started present significant gaps on these issues and considerable fragilities. Among the recipients of these dwellings, we interviewed a couple: a man and a woman. They joined the project because the man collaborated with a social cooperative linked to the NGO. The social housing/energy community project manager and his team offered them this opportunity because they were addressing some housing and economic difficulties. Moreover, they knew the other future inhabitants with mental health fragilities.

Of the two future inhabitants of social cohousing, the man was the one who had a greater interest in environmental issues and was motivated by the desire to use renewable energy.

> We are doing a lot of damage (to the environment) and that has consequences. There are those who deny it, but this is the reality. From what I hear about the glaciers, you cannot deny the reality, you can see the difference than the past, the situation is chang-

> ing, so in my opinion it is very important to focus on this issue. (…) The feature (of the project) that I like is this one of exploiting the energy of the sun and therefore of these renewable energies, these new technologies. I like this very much. (MSC-2)

With regard to the groups of future co-housers, he pointed out that the poverty conditions in which they live lead to a lack of culture on environmental issues or renewable energy systems and little interest in the financial savings that can result from their use.

> You have to consider who you have in front of you. It depends also on the cultural and social situation, because if one needs to have a house or has never had one or is waiting for one, maybe it becomes secondary the fact that he has photovoltaic, solar thermal. He/she only aims to have a place to stay, and then he/she realizes afterwards that he/she saves, that maybe he/she is doing something not only for himself/herself, but for others with what he has inside. (...) It depends on the context, it depends on the culture, it depends on the information, it depends on the attachment to planet Earth, on people, it is subjective, I repeat. (MSC-2)

On the other hand, this experimentation consists of an action aimed at building community practices mediated by consumption behaviours. However, it must pass through a learning process and gradual accompaniment of subjects with greater structural fragility.

This intervention aimed precisely at building a greater awareness of the environmental impact of their consumption. To this, the issue of energy saving and the use of renewable energy from a community perspective is linked, as a social worker involved in the project points out:

> It is an opportunity for them to ask themselves some questions and to become a little more aware of the fact that the energy they are consuming comes from a virtuous process, which is sustainable from a social and environmental point of view. Doing this with that type of people having those characteristics, therefore with a low cultural level, with problems of fragility, let's say, personal, obviously is a further challenge, because we certainly cannot explain it to them like this. Somehow we have to find a language that is more suitable for them. (MSC-3)

In other words, this pilot project is a possible model of community welfare in the housing, social, and energy sectors.

> This (model) can open new ways of collaboration between institutions and communities that physically live around these institutions with the integration of non-forced styles (the people haven't force themselves to change their habits). A school, for example, necessarily consumes more during the day, because it works during the day. If you have people who work and are busy during the day out of their home, there is a complementarity that can allow the school to pay slightly lower prices. (…) Therefore, they already save, but the choice to stay in an energy community can allow people, who live in situations of energy poverty in the area and have children attending that

> school, to have almost zero rates. Consequently, this determines a different relationship between families and school. They could become very interesting social models and tools to combat early school dropout if you work intelligently on this type of initiatives. It opens up interesting paths not explored at this time. (...) The idea is that the energy community can become a sort of new possibility for building fruitful relationships between some institutions and some families. (MSC-1)

3.3 The Community Dimension of the Prosumption of Space and Energy

What emerges strongly in both case studies is the community dimension of the prosumption, which also goes beyond the more traditional model of individual collectivising consumption and translates into a style of practical behaviour in relation to both the production and consumption of domestic spaces/activities and shared energy. The issue of trust is linked to the community dimension, almost overlapping at times: the bond of trust is a gateway but also a central value in both experiences, not only in terms of relationships but also as a practical strategy that makes it possible, for instance, to cope with reduced or absent economic capital.

In other words, the trust that structures the community dimension of cohousing/energy community experiences also assumes a facilitating function from an economic point of view. For example, trust in interpersonal relationships made it possible to solve financial problems by avoiding bank loans:

> We had already spent all the money we had and the company went bankrupt, so we all found ourselves in a dramatic situation and yet we didn't even have a discussion there. Whoever had the money advanced the money and started the work again. (...) Our friends put € 250,000 to resume companies that had not been paid and there was no discussion on this. This was done and then the money was paid back a little at a time, 7-8-10 years to return it. (WC-1)

The trusting bond, in the case of social cohousing, also makes it possible to define the dynamics of the internal distribution of costs among energy users in a way that is based on solidarity, as an alternative to the typical rigid correspondence with consumption.

> The energy community project, that we imagined and built, needed at the origin of a strong action that would allow us to design and test an engineering field and a hub management algorithm. All this could allow the mutualization of energy, according to algorithm that take into account the social needs, health needs and economic needs, therefore also the income and wealth of the people using it. (MSC-1)

More generally, however, the trusting bond is the pivot around which the mechanisms of adhesion, involvement, and construction of associated life, shared energy consumption, and domestic spaces revolve.

This applies to both cohousings:

> Those who go to live perhaps don't have the same awareness, even if they are people who are linked to us, so anyway there is also an emotional and trusting link with this project, so anyway they feel a little more in the family (MSC-2).

> In my opinion, basically there is a great mutual esteem, a knowledge that in any case each of us is accepted by the others, a container capable of welcoming you in moments in which you may be in difficulty (...). There is the trust that increases more and more, concretely. Because you share things, because they are relationship - conscious people anyway. In my opinion this is the best quality of the inhabitants of this condominium. (MC-3)

4. Findings

The two case studies analyzed show significant differences, but highlight some peculiar trends in energy consumption and housing patterns found in some sectors of Italian society. First, there is a tendency to return to the community dimension instead of the collectivized individual form of consumption, as categorized by Micheletti (2003). Analysis of the interviews and ethnographic observation revealed that at least part of the population with strong environmental, economic, and social value motivations is committed to building experiences based on strong bonds of trust. This trend is linked to energy-saving objectives, the democratization of processes and choices related to energy consumption, and the affirmation of new guidelines for sharing domestic spaces, activities, and services in daily life.

Although these two case studies have many similarities, they represent two different models, especially concerning the approach adopted for their fulfilment. In the first case, cohousing in Northern Italy is a bottom-up model of collaborative living based on a community—driven by strong environmental sensitivity, a developed aptitude for political participation, and the capability to build trusting relationships. Its members organize themselves to promote an alternative way of living in connection with the provisions of the energy transition, becoming privileged interlocutors for local administrators.

In the second case, social cohousing in Southern Italy represents a top-down model of collaborative housing: within an urban redevelopment project, it arises from an NGO in partnership with several public and private organizations to create a social cohousing by promoting an energy community. As is already happening in other areas of Southern Italy, where this model is beginning to be replicated (see, for instance, the experimental cases of renewable and solidarity-based energy communities in Naples, Ferla, Messina, Musolino, 2022), here it is the institutional actor who promotes forms of political participation: it represents an enabler in building the trust (Magnani & Cittati 2022; Tricarico 2021) necessary to develop community-like bonds. In this trajectory, the two case studies analyzed highlight how political consumerism applied to collaborative housing can open up new forms of social innovation focused on the energy transition. Although these two case studies do not allow for a generalization on a large scale, it is possible to hypothesise a similar development of what has already happened with solidarity purchasing groups, which over the years had the political

capacity to influence the local governments of many Italian regions, obtaining specific laws protecting of their producers and consumers. Closely to this, our types of cohousing can do the same in stimulating actions by local governments to support the creation of energy communities and to contribute concretely to the energy transition.

The definition of public policies aimed at setting up energy communities and collaborative housing models could have very positive repercussions if it considers these trends present in Italian civil society, even if they are still configurable as niche phenomena. However, the reception of this community dimension, centered on the sharing of many consumption behaviours of everyday life (energy, services, appliances, and domestic spaces), within the drawing up of laws and regulations, should become increasingly important and relevant because it reconfigures the consumption pattern (or prosumption) of citizens, especially for energy. This could also be a catalyst for new collective action or the strengthening of existing communities.What can be argued from our analysis is the necessity of adapting community-based housing and energy models to the local context, especially for countries featured by significant internal differences like Italy (De Vidovich et al. 2023) concerning the urban/rural contexts, the South, and the North, small and big cities, etc. If these differences are respected in drawing the "model" and practice of local communities in the energy transition domain, the capacity of these new social movements to contribute to the mitigation of the effects of climate change could be dramatically increased. This perspective is evident in the cases studied and can also be replicated thanks to the forms of social innovation. Shared living, as a form of social innovation, is characterised by the adoption of the community dimension, which involves joint management of consumption decisions and of the resource of energy, which is thus understood as a common good.

In addition, social innovation also constists of everyday practices that are the subject of shared knowledge and continuous mutual learning between the members of the two initiatives. This learning mechanism, based on social participation (Wenger 1998) and cooperation, rather than competitive relations, is more effective than the individual learning model also to activate processes of social change (Rogge, Theesfeld & Strassner, 2020) and innovation, as we have analysed in this paper. Indeed, at heart of this perspective is the possibility of sharing the experience of progressively acquiring of new knowledge and skills and realising them not in an abstract way but in an operational way, within a cooperative relationship, which in turn generates new relational skills. This condition makes it possible to activate mechanisms for the social reproduction of knowledge and related practices concerning energy and housing behaviour change, but also to consolidate them through their local networking (Moulaert & Nussbaumer 2014, 2005) in order to promote forms of transformation of everyday life and achieve greater widespread well-being, which is also potentially linked to the mitigation of climate change processes.

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