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The New Forms of Living: Challenges and Opportunities for an Eco-social Transformation

Abstract: I propose a literature-based reflection on new forms of living in the context of ecological transition. The policies that are supposed to guide the ecological transition in the European Union, grounded in principles of economic growth and competitiveness, prove to be at odds with the possibility of achieving a just transition. I examine new forms of living, such as collaborative living and energy communities, as social innovations that redefine the public-private relationships, holding potential for an eco-social transformation. However, the premises and outcomes of these experiments are varied and incoherent, with some projects perpetuating unsustainability and existing inequalities. A crucial element that emerges as foundational for the possibility of an eco-social transformation is the rethinking of the very concept of "living".

Keywords: just transition, eco-social transformation, new forms of living, policies, public-private

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Introduction

The escalating environmental crisis and growing inequalities within and among nations have unequivocally demonstrated that the production models and lifestyles inherent to capitalist systems are incapable of ensuring adequate living conditions for large segments of the human population, both now and in the future. For at least fifty years the need for a transition to ensure the sustainability of human existence on the planet has been the subject of public debate. During this period, numerous international treaties have been promulgated to promote what is called an "ecological transition" of humanity. Among the latest, the most important is the Agenda 2030, which sets out the strategy of the United Nations member states to achieve by 2030 «a better future for all people, including the millions who have been denied the chance to lead decent, dignified and rewarding lives and to achieve their full human potential. We can be the first generation to succeed in ending poverty; just as we may be the last to have a chance of saving the planet» (ONU, 2015, p. 12).

The 2030 Agenda is a global policy that is supposed to put sustainability and justice at the center, but it is a narrative that does not match with reality. In fact, this policy is not producing the desired results in either area. To explore the possibility of a just transition, in this contribution I will focus on a key issue in the contemporary debate, namely the new forms of living. If the transition in fact requires, even according to the European Commission, a change in lifestyles, the "home" dimension is certainly a central factor, as it is «a life-organizing infrastructure» (Lopes *et al.*, 2018, p. 48).

The concept of "living" is multidimensional and can be approached in many ways. The perspective of this contribution is within the framework of political ecology from a sociological standpoint. By bringing into dialogue studies on social innovation, sociotechnical transitions, and alternatives to capitalism, I will address the connections between housing and energy. In scholarly discourse, this correlation is seldom explored. However, it is deeply significant given the intricate interdependence of the «polycrisis» (Morin and

Kern, 1999, p.73) contemporary societies are facing. To comprehensively understand the evolution and potential solutions of these crises, it is essential to address their interconnections.

Green transition policies consider the intertwining of these areas only in relation to building efficiency. They ignore that people's practices do not change overnight and that a technical intervention may not yield the desired results. It can even make things worse, as happens with the «rebound effect» (Magnani, 2018, p. 28; Magnani and Scotti, 2024, p. 149).[2] Moreover, they ignore that dwellings, in addition to being inhabited, are located within a context, in territories, which are not all the same, but are «vital worlds» (TiLT, 2022, p. 7) each with its own socioeconomic, cultural, and ecological characteristics.

Addressing the issue of housing from a political ecology perspective highlight that a dwelling is not just a space bounded by walls (Ferri *et al.*, 2017). Instead, it is a node in a network of material and immaterial relationships that exist between the people who live in it and those who live around it, between the materials of which it is composed, the soil on which it stands, the energy that powers its systems and the ecosystem of which it is a part. Conceiving dwellings in strictly economic terms, only as goods that can be bought and resold, ignores all the factors that constitute "living".

In the first part of the paper, I will undertake a critical analysis of the principles and perspectives that underpin the ecological transition within the European Union (EU), focusing on the strategies proposed in relation to the interconnected crises of energy and housing. I highlight how the technical-managerial approach that informs such policies is unable to offer concrete solutions to these problems. In the second part, I will examine new forms of living from the perspective of social innovation, a widely used and debated concept, and their ability to respond to contemporary crises. I will scrutinize the extent to which these

2 The concept of "rebound effect" refers to the increase in consumption, for example of a household, when a more efficient technology is introduced. The lowering of the price, in this case of the electricity bill, is not matched by equal or lower consumption, and this phenomenon tends to cancel out the benefits potentially produced by the increased efficiency of the technology.

forms may contribute to fostering a just ecological transition and eco-social transformation, particularly in terms of reshaping the dynamics between the public and private sectors.

The European Union's policies for a just ecological transition

One of the main instruments by which the EU adopts sustainable development goals is the *European Green Deal* (2019), defined as the new growth strategy. The action plan sets out the primary goals and means to practice a "green or ecological transition" with the aims to «transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy» (European Commission, 2019, p. 2). The aspects relevant to this contribution on which the *Green Deal* focuses are competitiveness and economic growth; energy efficiency in industries and buildings; and fighting energy poverty.

A central role is assigned to just transition, however, as Bouzarovski (2023, pp. 1003-4) points out, the «dominant policy debates on the topic have seen a profusion of techno-managerial framings of the process, underpinned by narrow cost-benefit analyses». The goal of ensuring a just transition "for all" is constantly counterbalanced by the need to maintain and possibly increase EU's competitiveness. Two purposes that are not compatible. In these policies, justice is conceived as something to be enforced, according to an «engineering and unilinear logic» (TiLT, 2022, p. 97), through a series of institutionally governed reforms. The *Green Deal* fails to adequately confront the complexity, not only ecological but also social and political, of the efforts needed for transition (Bouzarovski, 2023).

Energy efficiency to solve energy poverty

The tools to tackle energy poverty are mainly financial and focus on the renovation of public and private buildings. In line with the technical-managerial perspective highlighted above, restru-

cturing in large blocks is identified as an essential objective, to obtain better financing conditions and reduce the costs of the interventions. Buildings renovation is described as an intervention with a double positive effect: on the one hand it would contribute to the path towards sustainability, on the other it would allow the cost of bills to be reduced and to stimulate the economy and local welfare. On the contrary, there is a risk that these interventions will fail in both areas, as they are «bounded, framed, and removed from the socio-technical context in which they operate» (Bouzarovski, 2023, p. 1006).

It is not clear to which companies, large or small, local or international, the economic benefits of buildings renovation would go, as the commission does not set up mechanisms to ensure fair redistribution of the available funding. It fails to acknowledge the significant variations across diverse local contexts, encompassing factors such as infrastructure availability or deficiency, the diversity of corporate entities, and variations in social welfare policies. Furthermore, the necessity of large-scale renovation interventions requires careful consideration. Moreover, the smartgrid issue, central to policies, implies two scenarios: centralization in supergrids or decentralization in microgrids (Magnani, 2018). As Magnani remarks, the use of digital platforms to collect information on energy performance and consumption does not necessarily imply an increase in the sustainability of the systems involved. Energy efficiency is undoubtedly a goal to be pursued. However, framing it as the main means of achieving the transition to sustainability overlooks several other factors that contribute to contemporary crises. Among these factors is a socioeconomic system that incentivizes consumerism and individualizes needs and responsibilities.

These are just some of the questions that can be raised, and which reveal the limited approach of EU policies. The organizational and normative perspective on which they are based neglects the «heterogeneity and complexity of the social world» (Bouzarovski, 2023, p. 1006). Numerous studies instead highlight the characteristics of «non-linearity and unpredictability» (Magnani,

2018, p. 99) that the reconfiguration of energy practices presents. It is essential to problematize both the issue of supply and demand for energy. This is in fact «dynamic, social, cultural, political and historical» (Shove and Walker, 2014, p. 55): consumption is the result of practices, not of a purely rational choice. Furthermore, the demand for energy is shaped by the material means with which it is consumed, and these means contribute to the «ongoing reproduction of practice» (ibidem). Practices cannot be changed only by making energy-related technologies more efficient. This is true for housing practices as well: they are also shaped by socio-cultural, not just rational, motivations, and supply and demand are interrelated in this area as well (Bourdieu, 2005).

Disregarding the socio-economic context within which these interventions are implemented poses a considerable risk of constraining their efficacy, both in terms of poverty alleviation and the attainment of sustainability objectives. Furthermore, this approach, taking the current standards of energy practices as given and immutable, facilitates the reproduction of the social, economic, and environmental inequalities existing in the territories involved. Indeed, the context in which they are located is that of a «capitalist economy, the legacies of settler colonialism, as well as a racialised and patriarchal socio-cultural order» (Bouzarovski, 2023, p. 1006). Transition policies, therefore, are configured as «technological fixes» (Pessina and Alkhalini, 2023, p. 238) as they pursue the ideology of Ecological Modernization, which seeks progress through technological innovation, rationalization and individualization. Therefore, they enable the reproduction of current material configurations and practices, with the aspiration to fuel capitalism through renewable energy sources.

The many faces of innovation: technological, organizational, social

Innovation is a central topic in the transition debate, as it is a foundational concept of the eco-modernist approach that the *Green Deal* embraces regarding technology. Yet, there is now a widespread

recognition that technology alone cannot resolve contemporary crises, as their underlying causes are entrenched within our social, economic, and cultural systems (Magnani, 2018). Traditionally, scholars who studied the relationship between society and energy considered social innovation as produced by technological innovation. As seen in the previous paragraph, the demand for energy is certainly shaped by the means by which it is consumed. However, demand is also socially constructed, so a sociocultural transformation can help change it.

In fact, the EU places significant emphasis also on social innovation. It is one of the central concepts of contemporary sociological analysis (Moralli, 2019). This kind of innovation refers to the reconfiguration of the relations between the state, the market and the civil society to meet social needs. Scholars refer to it mainly in two ways: as an «essentially contested concept» (Ziegler, 2017, p. 2) because it causes endless arguments about the right way to use it, and as a «quasi-concept» (ivi, p. 8) because it is used as a rhetorical concept that lacks a determined core. The two perspectives highlight problematic aspects of social innovation that should not be underestimated; yet they also reduce its potential as a theoretical concept, a practice and a normative tool that can help to understand the current transformations (Moralli, 2019).[3]

Among the hundreds of definitions that have been proposed, some common elements can be identified. The purpose, the forms, the actors and a cultural horizon shared by the subjects who participate. Social innovation aims to resolve social problems not yet or only partially satisfied, by creating or changing services, projects, products or ways of acting, and it is promoted by collective organizations. About the actors, there is an open debate on whether they can also be individual, in this work, following Moralli (2019), collective organizations with social purposes are preferred.

In recent years, there is a growing debate about the potential of social innovation in contributing to energy transitions (Dóci *et al.*, 2015; Klein and Coffey, 2016; Avelino *et al.*, 2019; Moralli,

[3] For discussion and application of some declinations of the concept to concrete projects see, in the field of energy, Matschoss et al. 2022, in the field of housing, Caruso 2017.

2019; Matschoss, 2022). Scholars' opinions on the issue vary. One of the main reasons lies in the fact that the interaction between social and political realities, with their consequent impact on regulatory frameworks at various hierarchies, configures a context that affects all the dynamics of social innovation (Matschoss, 2022, p. 4). Therefore, regulatory frameworks that focus on technical-managerial aspects and do not consider local social and political contexts are likely to have extremely limited and, above all, unequal effects. A relevant example in this context is represented by community energies, also mentioned in the *Green Deal*, which constitute an innovative way of producing and consuming energy, actively involving local actors such as businesses, citizens, and public administrations. Such initiatives are expected to bring environmental, social, and economic benefits.

Community energies have been studied by engineers, economists, and lawyers for a long time, with an emphasis on the associated economic and environmental benefits. Only recently there is an increasing focus on the social aspects (Hoffman and High-Pippert, 2010). Several studies have shown that the benefits of such innovations are not distributed equally among various social groups and that vulnerable groups appear to be more excluded. In fact, the results of these studies note in most cases a homogeneity of sociodemographic characteristics among members, with the prevalence of participants who are «male, middle-aged, well-educated and with incomes that are generally above the population average» (Magnani and Scotti, 2024, p. 147). They also record a lack of participation from local communities outside the projects (Hanke and Guyet, 2023). In sum, a lack of energy justice in terms of procedure, distribution, and recognition is reported (Heldeweg and Saintier, 2020). Since the characters of social innovation summarized earlier include the purpose of solving social problems, in this case it is not social innovation, but technological and organizational innovation. The concept of organizational innovation is related to the fields of management, and it refers to the improvements of products or services for the market (Lévesque, 2013). So, it does not produce social improvement beyond the market as social innovation should do.

Another area to which ecological transition policies pay special attention is the renovation of social housing, which is also studied as a social innovation capable of interacting with social transformations and responding to contemporary crises (Gili, Ferrucci and Pece, 2017). In housing policy, the EU has no direct competence. If it adhered strictly to the constraints of subsidiarity and additionality to which it is subject, it could neither legislate nor directly finance housing-related policies. Instead, the EU adopts a less stringent interpretation of these principles, intervening in various spheres, albeit through indirect approaches. From an initial «unofficial policy» phase (De Luca, Governa and Lancione, 2009, p. 360) between the 1980s and 1990s, the so-called Lisbon Strategy in 2000 inaugurates a second phase from which the EU monitors and coordinates national policies where possible. From this point on, housing issues are correlated with poverty and thus considered something to act on to tackle it.

A central aspect of the Strategy was to integrate economic policies with social policies, based on two principles: competitiveness and cohesion. The relationship between these two principles introduces a problematic element into the housing policy landscape. The emphasis on promoting competitiveness, as already pointed out, carries the risk of intensifying phenomena of social exclusion, which contrasts with the goal of promoting social cohesion. In the EU documents, the relationship between the two principles is not critically examined, but rather is interpreted in «a complementary and synergistic key» (ibid., p. 363). This simplified perspective implies that social cohesion is considered a precondition and not a priority objective, subordinate to maintaining the competitiveness of the European economy. This imbalance is also evident in the disparity of emphasis given to the two principles.

Through this lens, one is thus able to understand the special attention given in the *Green Deal* to the renovation of social housing, the dedicated funding for which is primarily distributed to companies operating in the various sectors concerned. Their positive implications on fuel poverty and housing problems turn out to be only incidental, if one considers that competitiveness

fosters processes that reproduce inequality. In Italy, for example, there is extreme weakness in the social housing sector. Not because of a lack of policies, but, first, because of a general tendency definable as *laissez faire*, due to which the role of the public is reduced to creating opportunities for the free market. Economic development has the priority, as it is deemed capable of solving social problems. Second, because even when the state has adopted regulatory policies for redistributive purposes, there has been other kind of compensations, leading to a scenario of formal over-regulation and substantive under-regulation (Minelli, 2004). As a result, for decades, housing policies have failed to respond to the housing crisis that, in 2022, affected nearly 1.5 million households (Giunta and Leone, 2022).

The roots of the crises

In Europe, the energy transition is based on economic competition and technological progress. Underlying this perspective is the notion of the possibility and necessity of perpetual economic growth, which remains linked to resource consumption, albeit with a focus on improving efficiency in exploitation. EU policies allocate funding predominantly to established and competitive market players because companies in the energy and housing sectors have the knowledge and the skills to overcome other economic players and benefit from these policies (Pessina, 2023).

In general, the ecological transition in Europe assumes ecological modernization (Mol, 1997) as a policy agenda (Pellizzoni and Osti, 2008). This is translated into the techno-managerial approach that frames the problem of energy and housing as issues to be addressed by technological innovation in a free market context, in which the state must allow self-regulation of economic actors and act as a promoter of democratic participation. In the context of transition, the only role that is allowed to civil society is to integrate itself into institutional processes.

The ecological transition is a long-standing global project, but it is in the public eye and constantly demonstrated by the

updated data and reflections of scientists and scholars that it is not yielding the desired results. It is now widely believed that the main reason for the ineffectiveness of policies and their practical translations lies in not addressing the actual causes of the crises we are experiencing and producing. These causes can be summarized in the processes of individualization, commodification, privatization, exploitation of resources, and in the promotion of an idea of limitless freedom. Processes and ideas that produce harmful effects on societies, ecosystems, economies, and individuals. In summary, the deep cause of the crisis consists of the social, economic, and ecological system that is capitalism.

The idea carried on at different levels (global, European, national, local) that a just transition can be achieved while keeping the system intact, generating the so-called "green capitalism", is fallacious. The harmful effects that the capitalist system produces cannot be solved by manipulating only the "economic variables" that constitute it as it is not just an economic system. Economic structures and economic agents are social constructions, inseparable from the complex of social constructions constitutive of a social order (Bourdieu, 2005). Capitalism is primarily a social organization model. It is based on the mythology of growth and progress, according to which humanity, or at least a part of it, is destined to dominate the world and shape it at will.

Nor can capitalism be considered merely a socioeconomic system. In fact, it establishes a specific form of relationship between humanity and nature. In other words, it creates its own «ecological regime» (Moore, 2015, p.158). In fact, no mode of production is configured as a purely economic fact, as it is grafted and nurtured from specific social and ecological ecosystems. The integration of economic and social policies promoted by the European Union is only an explication of an integration that has always been there. Not only that, but they have also always been ecological (Huber, 2015), even before the emergence of the sustainability issue.

An ecological, political, and social transition is only possible by entering into the complex relationships between different so-

cial dynamics. So, the dominant approach to transition, ignoring the inherently socio-ecological character of the efforts needed (Bouzarovski, 2023), cannot be right. It does not consider, intentionally or unintentionally, the role of conflict (Pessina, 2023), that is, the power relations and inequalities that underlie social production and reproduction. Conflict cannot be resolved through planning. "Justice" is not something that can be applied as in its theoretical and practical embodiments, is constantly (re) elaborated and (re)negotiated in the interactions between social actors. Indeed, Cooper (2016, p. 66) notes, «concepts are not things but processes»: they are constituted in the movement between imagination and actualization. A «generalized environmental consensus» (TiLT, 2022, p. 20) can never be realized: risks, interests and impacts will remain differentiated. Although the scientific data are incontrovertible, the political conflict cannot be transcended.

Identifying the causes of a problem does not necessarily lead to its solution; however, it is a necessary first step to take to change perspective. Capitalism is a historically determined socioeconomic system, not an inevitable destiny for humanity. Therefore, the trend can be reversed, starting with an «intelligent rationalization of the means and a wise limitation of the objectives» (Sachs, 2023, p. 6). Perhaps planetary limits are not absolute limits to be managed, but are structural limits (TiLT, 2022) and overcoming them requires a gaze reconversion.

New forms of living

The new forms of living are proposed at an institutional level and interpreted by scholars as a form of social innovation which, on the one hand, can contribute to addressing the social, economic, and ecological crises that afflict the world and, on the other, can promote a just transition. What are they and, more importantly, are they capable of achieving these goals?

Social innovation as a redefinition of relations between public and private

Civil society is often regarded as the primary catalyst and benefactor of social innovation and, potentially, social transformation. However, it is not a homogenous and cohesive entity, any more than other social actors engaged in innovation processes. It is more appropriate to consider them as diverse groups comprising different roles, value orientations and expectations. From these considerations, it is evident that innovation is not a linear process, devoid of conflicts and negotiation.

The relationship between the public and private sectors is one of the central themes that animate the debate on social innovation. In the everyday debate, the meaning of the adjective "public" «has been annulled and reduced to that of "state"» (Ricoveri, 2013, p. 51) and the market has subsumed society, reducing the actors on the scene to state and market. In this way, we lose sight of civil society, one of the «three components of the "state-market-civil society" triangle» (Moralli, 2019, p. 42) and which can be identified as a heterogeneous and conflictual set of actors «who operate outside both the state and the capital valorization process, but who take specific positions with respect to both» (Swyngedow, 2009, p. 68).

The distinction between public and private, therefore, turns out to be ideological and political. The two dimensions intersect much more often than it seems. If we consider the operation of the state, on the one hand, it contributes to protecting the interests of citizens; on the other hand, it pursues private interests, through the tendency to impose policies corresponding to theirs (Bourdieu, 2005). The state therefore presents itself as «an ambiguous and internally contradictory institution» (Swyngedow, 2009, p. 68). An example of this in the European context concerns the inclusion of private actors in the social housing sector, through "public-private partnerships". The state's contribution to social housing expands to encompass and economically incentivize private actors to undertake a series of activities (Marchetti, 2018), leading to an increase in rents and, in some cases, a reduction in

the scope of housing policies (De Luca, Governa and Lancione, 2009). Recently, scholars are beginning to pay more attention to the opportunities offered by public-community partnerships for the democratisation of local economies and to avoid the lack of transparency and public benefits of public-private partnerships (Chavez and Steinfort, 2022; Valentin and Steinfort, 2023).

A phase that is still evolving today began in the mid-1970s and saw the state's tendency to support market mechanisms and privilege private interests. If in the 1980s the state mainly maintained a «role as a link between local policies, private capital, and the needs of citizens» (De Luca, Governa and Lancione, 2009, p. 354), current housing policies follow a neoliberal model (Caruso, 2017) also supported by the push for competition promoted by the European Union. The characteristics of this new phase are: «deregulation of the public sector, centrality of the private market and, specifically, of property, progressive withdrawal of the State» (De Luca, Governa and Lancione, 2009, p. 369). This is particularly pronounced in Mediterranean countries, and Italy stands out among them with the chronic ineffectiveness of housing policies in addressing the housing issue (Minelli, 2004).

Shifting the attention to the territories, it is evident that the binary logic between public and private possession of a space or a resource does not reflect the complex nature of the interactions, between material and immaterial elements, between humans and ecosystems, which take place internally or in relation to them. Places and resources concern everyone, the human community in general, and cannot be privatised, except "formally" and temporarily, through laws which in any case only establish their *legal* status. They are unable to concretely circumscribe them, they always maintain their permeable nature which exceeds the public-private distinction. An illustration of the concept is provided by the research conducted by Lopes *et al.* which recounts of how, amidst heat waves in Sydney, people found refreshment «transgressively commoning "privately" owned space» (2018, p. 50), in this case the shopping centers. It is difficult to establish a precise distinction between public and private, both at a theoretical and

practical level, because it would mean arbitrarily reducing the complexity of the relationships that exist between social actors.

New forms of living as laboratories of social innovation

New forms of living explore innovative methods of utilizing living spaces, infrastructure and managing energy resources, in response to multifaceted contemporary shifts encompassing social, economic, and cultural domains, including alterations in family dynamics, demographic aging, and welfare system restructuring. Additionally, they address present-day social, ecological, and economic challenges.

The European and national landscape is extremely fragmented: there are many different forms, both in terms of the name – cohousing, ecovillages, co-living, social housing, supportive or collaborative condominiums, to name a few – and in terms of the size of the area involved, the number of people involved, and the legal forms. The motivations that drive people to participate in these projects are mainly sharing and collaborating with people who share a similar vision of living, the personalization of living spaces, the desire for social inclusion of vulnerable groups, the economic benefits and attention to environmental sustainability.

The new forms of living are a privileged field of study for investigating the changes that are taking place in the relations between civil society, the state, and the market. On the one hand, they modify the relationships between state and civil society with the so-called "public-private partnerships". On the other, they change relationships between people, creating shared spaces and commons within traditionally private contexts such as homes, which become open, in part, to neighbours and the entire citizenry. The narrative around new forms of living uses terms such as "participation", "community", "sustainability", "democratization", and "empowerment". However, the various experiments develop along different, inconsistent trajectories. On the one hand, there are projects that uncritically assume the principles of the capitalist paradigm, and on the other hand, there are projects that propose an alternative to it.

The acritical social innovation

Projects that assume the premises of the capitalist paradigm include, on the one hand, social housing and cohousing projects organized and managed by public administrations, and, on the other hand, energy communities created in collaboration between public administrations, companies, and citizens. These projects certainly meet some social needs and the narrative surrounding them might seem to contrast with the capitalist paradigm. However, it is a narrative that is not matched by reality. These projects uncritically apply neoliberal policies that, as highlighted in the first part, have competitiveness and economic growth as their primary goal. Social cohesion and collaboration are means to other ends, which contradict them in theory and practice. These projects do not act on the root causes of the crises they are supposed to respond to and do not change, rather superficially redefine, the relationships among social actors and thus the power relations that structure society.

In the case of social housing, for example, several scholars point out how it is in a problematic relationship with urban regeneration: the uncritical assumption of an integrated approach and of the opportunities offered by local action (De Luca, Governa and Lancione, 2009), in both national and European policies, becomes a rhetoric that prevents the real needs of territories from being identified. Participation and collaboration are tools to rebuild social cohesion, "community" and "sustainability" as means to foster economic growth and competitiveness. This dynamic reduces, without resolving, social tensions, which is necessary for capitalist reproduction, and prevents the activation of an eco-social transformation.

Analyzing the literature on community energies, Pellizzoni (Osti and Pellizzoni, 2018, p. 28) points out that the majority of studies also assume a «"managerial" and "collaborative" perspective». This perspective is based on a symbiotic idea of social transformation, which would occur through strategies that solve the practical problems of dominant elites through recognized, thus accepted, forms of social empowerment. A transformation that leaves the political and economic framework unchanged.

These kinds of innovation projects generally turn out to be arbitrary. In fact, "participatory planning" is managed by a political and technical team that includes citizens in a rigid scheme, in which their participation is instrumental to the acceptance of previously defined proposals. The urban planner, as Sennett (2018, p. 28) wrote, must be «a partner of the city inhabitant [...] critical of the way people live and self-critical of what they build». Expanding beyond urban planning to include new forms of energy production and housing projects, it can be said that the role of experts, from a social and spatial justice perspective, should be twofold. On the one hand, they should provide their technical expertise on issues that may be too complex for a diverse group of people. On the other, they should leave room for people who inhabit and therefore, within limits, know territories best. Not only with the aim of getting projects accepted, but to co-create, with the aim of fostering people's self-determination, to bring their demands together as far as possible, and to build a plural and inclusive future.

A transformation driven by a technical-administrative perspective that relies on preconceived notions and admits only marginal participation proves to be a failure because it does not consider people's dispositions and practices. For example, as it happens it is uncritically assumed that housing proximity between groups with different socioeconomic characteristics corresponds to shared values, a sense of belonging to places, and practices of solidarity (Bronzini and Filandri, 2018). A community, as well as democratic participation, cannot be established by technical-administrative mechanisms (Hoffman and High-Pippert, 2005). Otherwise, they exist only at the formal level.

The social innovation of community practices

Traditional social movements have been changing in recent decades. From a predominantly social-critical perspective, they have shifted their focus to practicing innovative solutions that have an impact not only on the economy but on broader social welfare. Scholars and activists have developed various interpre-

tive frameworks to study these movements, the most popular of which are degrowth (D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis, 2015), post--growth (Rosa and Henning, 2018), acceleration (Rosa, Lessenich and Dörre, 2015), *Sustainable Community Movement Organizations* (Forno and Graziano, 2014), commons and commoning (De Angelis, 2017), and real utopias (Wright, 2010). One formula for including them all that seems most appropriate for the purposes of this paper is "transformative innovation movements" (Avelino, Monticelli and Wittmayer, 2019), which stands at the intersection of three fields of research: social innovation, sustainability transitions and social movements.

They may be characterized as transformative due to their implicit or explicit intent to modify the dominant structures within a given social context. Regarding the issue of housing and energy, one can take as case studies a part of the cohousing movement (still fragmented, but growing), including housing occupations, and the community energy movement. According to this perspective, Avelino, Monticelli and Wittmayer identify five main mechanisms by which these movements contribute to transformative change: prefiguration, socio-material innovation across domains, translocal empowerment, diverse repertoire of actions, sharing collaboration across movements.

By prefigurative practices, scholars mean those practices that express in the realm of everyday life the political ends of actions. With these practices people align their means with their ends, unlike the capitalist logic that subordinates the former to the latter. The two transformative innovation movements considered here embody prefiguration by providing tangible examples of how domestic and community life, as well as the production and consumption of energy, can be approached differently.

They generate "socio-material innovations" as they integrate technological, ecological, political, cultural, and economic dimensions, engaging in far-reaching change. For example, housing occupations challenge not only the socioeconomic system that produces inefficient management of housing stock, but also political structures by promoting alternative models of managing

social distress. These movements weave ties beyond the local dimension, creating or participating in networks that allow them to recognize and feel themselves as part of a broader context. Possibly even receiving support from it, as in the case of the European federation for renewable energy cooperatives (REScoop).

In addition, these movements engage in other actions that exceed foreshadowing and are aimed at transformative change, such as «protesting, lobbying, training and campaigning» (ibid., p. 74). For example, people involved in housing occupations, become active in protesting for the right to housing including alongside the anti-eviction movement, and at the same time engage in dialogue with city institutions to influence their policies and to advocate practices of urban self-recovery and collective property management. In addition, they participate in movements that exceed the right to housing, such as workers' struggles for decent work, or environmentalist demonstrations against the climate crisis, recognizing the intersectionality of these struggles and the need to bring them into dialogue to activate an overall transformation of the dominant socioeconomic system.

Transformative innovation movements thus seem to be one of the possible paths for a radical eco-social transition that corrects the ontological and epistemological errors (TiLT, 2022; Monticelli, 2022) on which contemporary socioeconomic systems are based. These movements are «rehearsals of the future» (TiLT, 2022, p. 38), that is, utopias or prefigurations that allow a glimpse of one of the possible ways in which "living" can evolve and a taste of it in the present. In these laboratories of socio-material innovation, civil society has reorganized itself by generating «practiced and prefiguring heresies» (ibid., p. 41) that represent alternative ways of thinking, doing, and organizing communal living beyond the public-private dichotomy. Moreover, they aspire to transform the world by inserting themselves in the interstices and constituting themselves as «responsible intermediary bodies» that «practice utopias of living and consuming-producing in common» (ibid., p. 50). This interpretive perspective seems to be able to integrate the social, political, and ecological dimensions

of the new forms of living, to read them as laboratories of social innovation with the potential to bring about a bottom-up social transformation.

The potential of transformative innovation movements remains an open question. First, these experiences are often tied to the local context and thus present scalability problems (Magnani, 2018). In this regard, Monticelli points out that any radical transformation, by definition, is «"multidimensional", "intersectional" and "multi-scalar"» (Monticelli, 2019, p. 6). It requires a redefinition of relationships between different levels (personal, political, and practical). The diffusion patterns that follow prefigurative initiatives are «non-linear, rhizomatic, network-like and place-based» (ibid., p. 6).

Second, there are those who believe that they can be a means of depowering political conflict in an identity-driven direction and of reconstituting the social relations that capitalism has eroded but needs to overcome the current crisis and regain control (Osti and Pellizzoni, 2018). However, prefigurative initiatives do not only respond to people's immediate needs, but orient them toward social responsibility, politicizing them (TiLT, 2022). Moreover, "traditional" political conflict is not necessarily incompatible with these activities; they can complement and proceed together and perhaps even gain strength in this way. As Forno (ibid.) points out, however, plural action, acting on different spheres and scales, is necessary for the transformation of the current socioeconomic system; therefore, even the joint efforts of individual actions and movements are insufficient, but «institutional proactivity» is also needed (ibid., p. 78).

In the current circumstances, envisioning significant "old-fashioned" revolutionary transformations may seem challenging. However, a viable avenue for substantial change resides precisely in initiating a shift in individual lifestyles initially, while fostering continual dialogue with fellow community members regarding desired modes of existence. Engaging in such endeavours does not preclude participation in movements striving for broader social, political, and economic reform.

Rethinking living for an eco-social transformation

Taking a critical perspective, the concept of "living" to which I refer is based on a relational perspective, according to which one cannot live in isolation. What is generally called "dwelling", whether it is a building or not, is only a point, a junction in the much larger and more complex network of relationships that is the web of life (Moore, 2015). It is a «space of flow and encounter across porous boundaries [...] and that enact a commons that is continually in the making» (Lopes *et al.*, 2018, p. 48). The material flows that pass through it or stay there for a long time are intertwined with a larger network. To inhabit a place is inevitably to be embedded in a complex network of relationships.

In recent decades, however, especially in the global North, the concept of "dwelling" has been culturally and politically constructed as an enclosure, a private space separated from the outside (Ferri *et al.*, 2017). It has been surrounded by high fences, enclosed by large gates and window grates, stocked with an ever-increasing number of appliances that insulate it and virtually make it independent from the outside. With the advancement of digital technologies, it is also possible to receive every resource needed to survive at home. The house has been transformed into «an enclosed and private space with a strong boundary» (Lopes *et al.*, 2018).

The house is a junction at which some key dimensions of crises manifest themselves – housing deprivation, energy poverty, and environmental crisis – that need to be addressed from the perspective of trying to build a just transition. In fact, the house can be considered a «crucial structuring element of social inequalities» (Bronzini and Filandri, 2018, p. 378). The multitude of disparities evident in access to housing and energy warrants an exploration of the provisioning of these essential goods from the standpoint of social and spatial justice.

As the feminist movement has advocated, the boundaries between the public and private dimensions are not as clear-cut as people think: the personal is political. That is, the construction of new ways of living together and new practices in traditionally "private" contexts – such as the organization of spaces or the

consumption of energy in the domestic sphere – is a political action as well. An action, in fact, to be "political", does not necessarily have to be carried out in the public-institutional sphere. Power relations in society do not take place only in these spheres; they are present and structure every level. Members of civil society also participate in this structuring and thus can, within certain limits, act on it.

On the other hand, history teaches that precise planning for the future never achieves its goals: to initiate a transformation what matters is to identify an orientation, a direction. In place of precise planning, a «dense directionality» (TiLT, 2022, p. 107), based first on values and then concretized in projects, is more useful. Conceptualizing the entire project from the beginning, otherwise, is likely to confine people and reality into a rigid structure.

As I tried to show in the first part, the technical-managerial perspective of the EU ecological transition does not provide for a comprehensive intervention on the causes of the cross-cutting inequalities affecting housing and seems more focused on maintaining the status quo and control over territories. In this way it allows the reproduction of social and spatial inequalities that have been undergoing a process of polarization for decades throughout the EU and particularly in Italy. The lack of housing in good condition, affordability and housing stability are factors that are part of the multidimensional and complex phenomenon that is poverty (Tirado-Herrero, 2023). Its immediate result is a state of deprivation of essential goods and services, but at its root it is a socially determined unequal distribution of the same. In other words, it is produced by an unjust social order.

Conclusions

EU policies driving the ecological transition in recent years assume as a given the need and possibility of green growth. Such growth would occur through an ecological reform of industrial democracies, primarily through greater efficiency in the use of natural resources by science and technology (Mol, 1997). The vi-

sion of the future they promote implies a world in which the role of innovators and entrepreneurs in promoting sustainable development is central, ensuring that growth occurs in conjunction with environmental protection. The role of the state remains to promote democratic participation and enable self-regulation by economic actors. Social movements can contribute to the transition by collaborating with other social actors. In sum, the driver of reform would be technological and organizational innovation, within a free market framework. To pursue these goals, transition policies develop a technocratic and managerial approach.

The goal of reducing or even eliminating inequality, repeated in all international treaties and policies, remains a proclamation without tools to be implemented. The instruments prepared for civil society participation and collaboration in transition are conceived as means to other ends; therefore, they fail to yield tangible results in terms of democratization. Likewise, interventions to address lack of access to essential goods such as energy and housing, planned outside or above the socioecological contexts in which they should be implemented, fail to produce significant improvements in people's lives. Particularly in the disadvantaged segments of the population that would need it most. This is also the case with projects that assume an idea of social innovation as a situated solution to as-yet unmet needs and do not promote real social transformation, in fact contributing to the reproduction of a status quo that has proven for decades to be unable to concretely convey sustainability and social and spatial justice.

Addressing the issue of housing by overcoming the material and social isolation in which it is represented in the dominant culture, means recognizing the «permeable materiality» (Bouzarovski, 2022, p. 1008) that characterizes homes, the flows of energy that flow through them, and social knowledge and practices. Some experiments in the field of housing start from this perspective and can be interpreted as transformative innovation movements that promote an eco-social model that stands in the interstices of the capitalist system to transform it from within. These movements build everyday utopias (Cooper, 2016), pro-

moting a vision of a plural and just future through a collective management of territories and resources and the reweaving of community relations beyond the dichotomy between public and private.

While these movements embody the potential for social transformation, there remains doubt as to the actual possibilities of their spread to the whole of society and their relationship to the programmatic efforts opposed to them coming from above. This is a first issue that social research needs to investigate. Another area that needs to be explored through empirical research concerns an analysis of how experiences of this kind are carried out in Italy today. A limitation of my analysis, in fact, is that most of the literature on the topic of new forms of living, but especially the empirical research, concerns European countries that have different characteristics from the Italian context. In Italy these experiments have been spreading for only a few years, so there is still much to investigate.

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