Participatory Action-Research facing the Contemporary Conjuncture. Lessons from Eastern Sicily*

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Abstract

This article contributes to the long-standing debate on how universities can meaningfully engage with distressed communities to improve their quality of life. It draws on the author's twenty years of work in Eastern Sicily, Italy, through the lens of the well- established form of engaged scholarship called Participatory Action Research (PAR). The article seeks to clarify misunderstandings around PAR in the Italian context in the face of the growing enthusiasm for the so-called university's 'third mission.' It purpose is to identify and discuss some of the key challenges and obstacles PAR faces in the current conjuncture, while offering insights on how to address them in order to fulfil its original mission: counteracting significant and long-standing socio-economic and spatial inequalities.

Questo articolo contribuisce al lungo dibattito sulle ragioni e le modalità di impegno dell'Università per il miglioramento della qualità della vita in comunità disagiate. Si basa su vent'anni di lavoro dell'autrice nella Sicilia orientale, in Italia, ispirato a una consolidata forma di 'ricerca impegnata' denominate ricerca-azione partecipata (PAR). L'articolo mira a chiarire alcuni fraintendimenti relativi alla PAR nel contesto italiano, alla luce del crescente entusiasmo per la cosiddetta 'terza missione' dell'università. Il suo obiettivo è individuare e discutere alcune delle principali sfide e ostacoli che la PAR deve affrontare nell'attuale congiuntura, offrendo al contempo spunti su come affrontarli per realizzare la sua missione originaria: contrastare le profonde e persistenti disuguaglianze socio- economiche e spaziali.

Keywords: Neoliberal university, civil society, undercommons

Parole chiave: università neoliberista, società civile, undercommons

Introduction

In recent years, under the pressure of new norms and governmental procedures for the evaluation of universities' performances, the Italian academic landscape has seen a surge of interest in the notion of 'third mission'. This notion is based on the idea that Universities not only are meant to pursue the

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advancement of scientific knowledge and its transfer to society through high-quality education, but they are also expected to, somehow, play a direct, explicit role in social development, innovation, and the overall advancement of the quality of life across cities and regions. This relatively recent national trend has connections with a much older and wider international debate on the need to move Universities beyond the 'Ivory Tower' model toward one that engages more directly with the most pressing issues of society (Boyer, 1990). US higher education scholars have referred to such a model using the label 'engaged scholarship', but labels can mean very different things across a variety of spatial and time-contexts as well as academic fields. In the case of engaged research, due to its roots in spatial and time-specific contexts, since theory is deeply shaped in a circular dialogue with local practices, there is a great mismatch in the terminology of traveling concepts, worsened by translation issues, that compromises international understanding.
This article aims at contributing to such a long-standing debate, drawing from my personal 20-year-long experience in Eastern Sicily, Italy, adopting one specific type of engaged scholarship internationally known as Participatory Action-Research (PAR). After a brief overview of what PAR is in the literature and how it relates to Planning, which helps clearing the air from frequent misunderstandings and the risk of over-romanticization of such an approach, the purpose of this article is to identify and discuss some of the challenges and obstacles faced by PAR in the contemporary conjuncture. The article concludes by advancing some ideas on how to approach such challenges and obstacles in order to fulfill PAR's original promises of advancing quality of life in the face of significant and long-standing socio-economic inequalities.

My encounter with Participatory Action-Research

In Italy, urban and regional planning has developed as an applied discipline rooted in architecture, responsible for producing knowledge on how to shape cities in 'harmony' with social needs and desires, with a strong focus on land use and urban forms. In the late nineties, however, such a traditional perspective was harshly criticized by Italian theorists, who, drawing from international planning literature as well as postmodern

philosophy and complexity theory (Pizziolo and Micarelli, 2003; Scandurra, 1999), invited planners to dismiss their traditional top-down, rationalist, technocratic paradigms and to search for alternatives. Various scholars brought into the Italian debate new ideas developed overseas: planners working outside of the institutional realm in direct support of communities opposing top-down plans (Davidoff, 1965; translated in Italian by Crosta, 1973) and/or decision-makers being asked to make planning processes more participatory (Arnstein, 1969), deliberative (Forester, 1988, translated in Italian by Borri, 1998), or collaborative (Healey, 1997, Translated by Borri in 2003). These theories suggested the need to drastically change planning's rationalist paradigm (Sandercock, 1997, translated in Italian by Monno, 2004) and promote a genuine mix between 'planning expertise' and residents' 'common knowledge' (Fisher, 2000), while establishing a mutual learning relationship between them (Friedmann, 1987, translated in Italian by Borri, 1993).

Such a significant shift has had an impact on the relationship between planning scholars and urban communities worldwide, making researchers look beyond the 'physical fabric of a city' and engage with the social dimension. This meant a push for Italian planning scholarship to be cross-pollinated with social sciences' methods (Attili, 2008), resulting in what was already a very long-term tradition in the English-speaking academy (Zeisel, 1981): the importance of looking at the built environment through a variety of qualitative methods aimed at understanding people in space. As a matter of fact, Italian and international planning scholarship has experienced a significant growth in popularity of case-study research, ethnographies, documenting 'insurgent spatial practices' among communities, activists, and grassroots performing – with or, more often, without planners –. This literature is in search of what 'non-technocratic planning' might look like in practice (Sandercock, 1998; Miraftab and Wills, 2005; Cellamare, 2008) or aims at unveiling planning's dark sides (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Yiftachel, 1998). As a result, in an effort to avoid 'technocracy', much of planning research has evolved into a particular kind of social science—one that focuses empirically on cities and regions, and on how they are shaped and governed.

In the early 2000s, while this debate was just unfolding, I was an early-career academic whose research interests were

highly influenced by my life and work in Sicily, one of the most distressed amongst the European regions, characterized by a long-standing history of socio-economic divides and ties between the mafia and the political establishment. I was certainly aligned with most of the epistemological critiques against *technocratic* planning, but I was not entirely convinced by the social science shift because it implied a significant disengagement from any responsibilities of guiding planning practice and decision-making (Campbell, 2012). Around me, there were not enough best 'insurgent practices' to be documented, while, at the same time, planning's dark sides were widely recognized yet remained unresolved. My main research question was: how do I avoid technocracy but still maintain an explicit, direct relationship with humans' courses of action? This question led me to PAR, a research approach that emerges from the application to the 'research profession' of the same epistemologies that were used by Italian theorists in the 90s to criticize the planning profession. PAR significantly predates not only the relatively recent Italian debate on the university's 'third mission' but also the U.S. debate on engagement of the early 1990s.

PAR's roots can be traced back to work that was not necessarily labelled as such. Popular educators between the 1940s and 1960s experimented with collective learning practices aimed at promoting social change for communities living under conditions of oppression (Freire, 1967; Dolci, 1974). These educators were among the first to emphasize the interconnectedness and simultaneity of knowing and acting in learning processes that foster awareness and empowerment. This is the premise, for instance, of a conceptualization of social science known in Italian as *con-ricerca* (not to be confused with the English term co-research), which engages the powerless, oppressed, and marginalized in direct and unfiltered individual or collective storytelling as a strategy for emancipation (Dolci, 1954; Montaldi, 1961; Dolci, 1966; Alquati, 1975). Popular educators' work inspired scholars worldwide to develop PAR as a strategy to democratize knowledge (Hall, 1975; Fals Borda and Rahman, 1991). PAR had a significant impact on the social sciences and development studies throughout the 1980s and 1990s, with growing evidence that participatory, action-oriented research can address complex social issues more equitably and effectively

than traditional applied research (Whyte, 1991; Greenwood and Levin, 1998; Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). In PAR literature, 'participatory' refers to the fact that all responsibilities are shared between researchers and those directly affected by the issue under study. The term 'action' underscores the aim of research to be used for taking concrete steps toward addressing the identified issue. Accordingly, the evaluation of outcomes, including lessons learned from failures, is considered an integral part of the research process. In synthesis, PAR engages people experiencing complex issues alongside researchers with a scientific interest in such issues in a process of development and subsequent application of innovative strategies aimed to address them.

PAR has influenced the field of planning in various contexts, such as development planning in rural areas of the Global South (Chambers, 1997), disadvantaged regions of the Global North (Dolci, 1974; Gaventa, 1980), and deindustrialized urban areas (Forester *et al.*, 1993; Reardon, 1998, 2003).

Doing PAR at Unict (2005-2025)

In the literature, PAR is usually explained as a partnership between university researchers, interested in using knowledge for good, and *a civic partner* (Reardon, 2006).

Within the University, there can be one or a few faculty members who can also engage students and/or staff members. The civic partner is usually made of individuals acting as co-researchers and having a vested interest in the research outcomes (ideally because their life is directly impacted and they are interested in using research to obtain an improvement). Often such a collective is not just a 'group of residents facing a problem', rather it includes one or more civil society actors that differ from the State and the market, such as NGOs, community-based organizations, unions or professional associations, faith-based groups, activist networks and social movements, informal grassroots collectives and others.

In my own PAR work in Eastern Sicily, carried out in the last two decades – with two breaks, spent working in the United States (2010-11 and 2015-18) –, I have rarely worked as single faculty member. More often, I have worked with a handful of colleagues – either at Unict but also in partnership with other

Universities (Lambert-Pennington *et al.*, 2018; Raciti and Saija, 2018; Pappalardo and Saija, 2020, 2024; Saija *et al.*, 2024) – and many students.
I worked within partnerships with a large variety of civic partners (see Figure 1 and Table 1), from single grassroots or non-profit organizations to broad coalitions of various types of civic organizations, including some encompassing civic society and small municipalities.

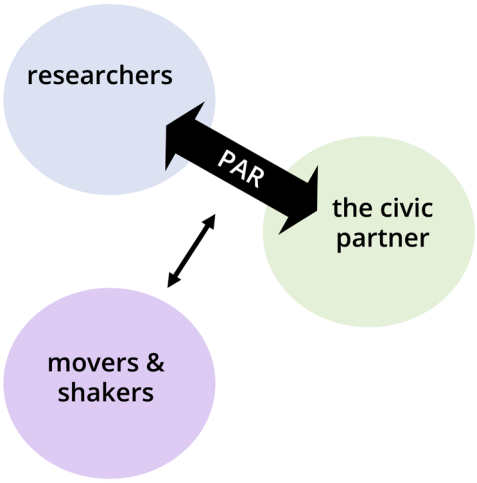

Fig. 1 – a schematization of the traditional PAR system (author's elaboration).

Less frequently, the literature discusses the existence of a very important third 'entity' in the PAR system (see Figure 1): the *movers and shakers*, i.e., individuals, organizations, or institutions holding some form of power over the issue being researched. Usually these are public authorities, large economic actors, or a combination of the two. In my experience in Eastern Sicily, PAR partnerships often emerge in response to the misuse of power by the movers and shakers that entails either 'not doing what they could or are supposed to do' or 'doing the wrong thing'. Frequently, in left-behind places, partnerships arise from indifference and long-term neglect (e.g., Sicilian inner towns like Vizzini, Lentini, and Carlentini, inner municipalities of the Simeto Valley, or Catania peripheral

public housing neighbourhoods). Conversely, in hotter real-estate areas, partnerships are more likely to develop in response to political decision-makers promoting or supporting projects and plans that are perceived as aligned with the interests of the few and detrimental to most residents. Some examples include: awarding a contract for the construction and management of a waste-to-energy facility in the Simeto Valley to companies suspected of mafia ties; the development of a large-scale, dolphin-shaped exhibition centre in the mid of the Tremestieri fishing village in South Messina, following the demolition of a regionally owned historic site of industrial archaeology called Ex-Sanderson Area; the privatization of nearly the entire stretch of publicly accessible beach in Giardini Naxos; and the promotion of projects and policies that support overtourism in Catania's historic city centre.

In almost all these places, PAR has not achieved all what we had hoped for. However, overall, it has proved to be highly effective in raising popular awareness about significant political and development issues and increasing political participation amongst residents. In some cases, PAR has also reached additional tangible results: halting the construction of undesired large-scale projects (the Simeto incinerator and the Dolphin-shaped exhibition centre) and leading to the re-use of historic abandoned elements of the built environment for the benefit– and often under the initiative – of community groups. Examples include the San Marco train station and the old slaughterhouse in Paternò (Simeto Valley), both converted into community hubs, and the historic prison of Vizzini, today housing a community-based honey cooperative. In other cases, PAR has generated plans impacting public decision-making. Some examples are: the approval by 10 Simeto Municipalities of a valley-wide strategic development plan called Simeto River Agreement (2015-2018); the 2024 launch of a formal process of revision of the Maritime State Property Management Plan in Giardini Naxos; the ongoing negotiation to transfer the property of the Ex-Sanderson Area from the regional government to the local Municipality; the involvement of the Catania Public Housing Authority in a partnership with civic groups for the promotion of affordable housing in the gentrifying historic centre of Catania.

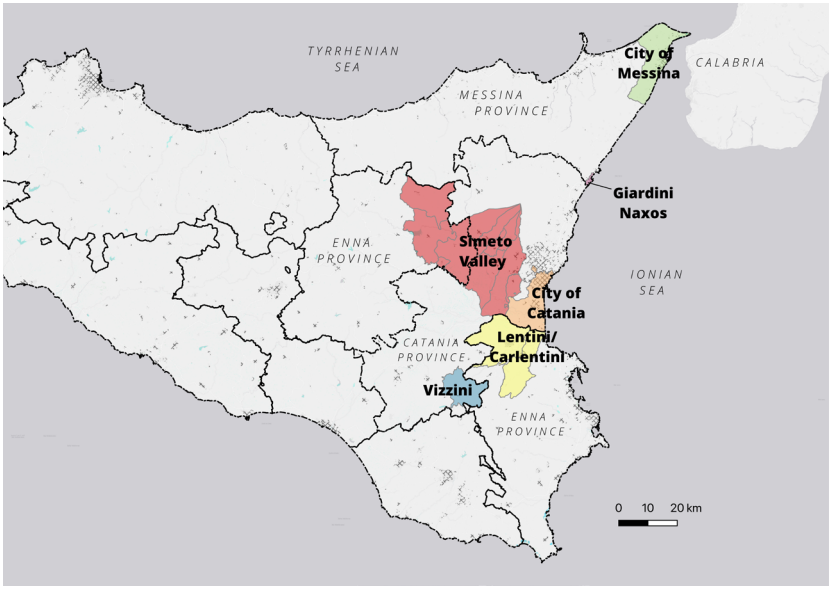

Fig. 2 – localization of the main Participatory Action-research projects carried out by the University of Catania in Eastern Sicily between 2007 and 2025 (author's elaboration)

	Where	Researcher/s	Civic partner	Movers & Shakers	issue	time
1	Simeto Valley	(beginning) two early career researchers; (toward the end) multi-university formalized	Coalition of grassroots and Municipalities	The Regional Government and some local administrators	Contrast the incinerator project and production of a valley-wide strategic plan for sustainable development	2007-2018
2	Librino Public housing neighborhood, Catania	Faculty and early career researchers	Grassroots coalition	Local administrators, the private firm responsible for the completion of the	Push local administrators to complete the neighborhood plan with services and facilities	2006-2009
3		One experienced and a few early career researchers	A single no-profit	Local Administrators	Enhance social cohesion and quality of public services in a city-owned community gardens site	2022-23
4	Trappeto Public Housing complex, Catania	A few faculty members	A single no-profit	Local Administrators	Facilitate the creation of a neighborhood coalition for the revitalization of a public park	2023-24
5	Giardini Naxos	A few faculty members	A single no-profit	Local Administrators, large entrepreneurs in the tourist sectors	Engaging residents in the struggle against the privatization of publicly accessible beaches	2024-25
6	South Messina	Multi-university partnership	Citizens' association	The regional government and local administrators	Stop to a large-scale project of an exhibit center to save a historic site that can host services and facilities for residents.	2023-ongoing
7	San Berillo historic neighborhood, Catania	A single faculty member and students	A social cooperative	Local Administrators	Promote inclusive urban regeneration in a historic distressed neighborhood, favoring affordable housing and residents' quality of life	2020-ongoing
8	Lentini & Carlentini	A single faculty member and students	A single Grassroots organization	Local administrators and the Regional Government	Production of Development strategies to contrast decline and neglect and environmental pollution	2023-ongoing

Table 1 – list of the main Participatory Action-research projects carried out by the University of Catania in Eastern Sicily between 2007 and 2025 (author's elaboration).

Looking back at my twenty years of PAR, I have learned equally from failures and successes, while encountering significant resistance from within the academy. In former publications (Saija, 2014; 2016), I have interpreted such a resistance as connected to a lack of general understanding of PAR's unique epistemological features and doubts on the scientific rigor of situated knowledge. In the contemporary conjuncture, however, I am convinced that challenges faced by PAR have little to do with epistemology and academic rigidity and are increasingly coming from a different direction: the significant socio-cultural and political shift toward neoliberism, austerity, and meritocracy characterizing our socio-political and economic conjuncture.

PAR facing the rise of the Neoliberal University

In the 50s and 60s, PAR originated from the idea that fragile, marginalized communities cannot be fully helped just from the outside, especially if the outside is what made them marginal in the first place. Instead, they have to develop from within the ability to pursue change. In other words, PAR was meant to operate in those contexts that are most negatively impacted by unequal spatial development models, where long-lasting social change requires a clear opposition to dominant power structures and development models. This means that, if it is done well, PAR does generate political conflict, making it a controversial approach for higher education establishments that are institutionally and financially embedded in such power structures. According to Goldsmith (1998), it is more likely for universities to keep fishing dead bodies from the river rather than going upstream to figure out and stop who's killing and throwing them into the water. It is not a coincidence that the most successful experiences of PAR – with very few exceptions (Puckett *et al.,* 2017) – have been carried out either by independent groups or organizations, like Myles Horton's *Highlander Folk School in the US South in the 30s and 40s* (Horton *et al.*, 1990) and Danilo Dolci's *Centro Studi* in Western Sicily in the 50s and 60s (Dolci, 1974), or by single faculty members and students inhabiting their institutional space in a critical and creative manner (Harney and Moten, 2013).
In my 2016 book (Saija, 2016), this idea was formulated only as a general argument. My experiences following its publication have prompted me to elaborate on this argument further. While the 'old

academy' – the one based on the blind trust in objective knowledge, the neutrality of rigorous science, and the supremacy of basic over applied knowledge – used to look at PAR with suspicion, nowadays we are witnessing a counter shift, which, unfortunately, is not necessarily good news. The increase of institutional support to engaged scholarship is related to the introduction of new governmental evaluation metrics aimed at measuring Universities' 'third mission' performance. This innovation can easily be framed within a broader and more recent global shift toward a neoliberal university model – characterized by market-oriented logics, managerial governance, and a strong emphasis on measurable outputs (Benneworth, 2012; Brown, 2015). This transformation reframes education and research as commodities, prioritizes efficiency, competition, and performance metrics, and redefines students as consumers and faculty as entrepreneurial knowledge workers. Traditional academic values - critical inquiry, collegial governance, and public service – are increasingly marginalized in favour of economic relevance, external funding, and impact rankings. Within this context, the longstanding epistemological primacy of basic over applied research is largely overturned, as institutional priorities and funding increasingly favour research agendas explicitly tied to 'exploitation' and transfer opportunities. Within the neoliberal university, researchers' direct engagement with non-academic actors - such as residents, grassroots groups, stakeholders, organizations, and institutions – is increasingly welcomed.

In this context, there is a widespread tendency to conflate PAR with at least two other types of engaged research. First, PAR gets confused with applied research conducted for external stakeholders (consultancy model) with the goal of solving predefined problems. This confusion stems from a lack of understanding that PAR is not the application of pre-developed expert knowledge for the benefit of a client, but rather a process of collective learning aimed at addressing wicked problems that have no single, clear solution. In all applied fields of knowledge, and planning makes no exception, the boundary between research and professional practice has been historically so blurred that, up until today, for many is still hard to understand the 'novelty' of the 'public engagement' and 'third mission' label. Quoting one of my colleagues from the engineering school, "*If all applied research is,*

by definition, meant to be applied and do good in the world, what is the point of using a different label?" Within the broader discourse on the university's third mission, PAR is therefore increasingly conflated with applied research in line with a wider resurgence of technocratic paradigms and the current pressure within the neoliberal universities for knowledge exploitation.
Second, PAR is confused with research activities aimed at maximizing the number of people involved alongside university faculty and students, like:

a) interviews and surveys;

b) service-learning activities – i.e., the provision of services to a community through the use of studio projects, internship hours, and university clinics;

c) and other non-action-based participatory research activities, usually called co-research or collaborative research, involving local actors in data collection activities, not followed by immediate concrete actions.

Of the listed examples, a) is standard social science, even though many scholars, without any background in humanities or the social sciences, still perceive such activities as 'participatory' based on the fact that experts go beyond numbers and spend some time listening to people; b) is a pedagogical approach that gained a lot of success in the US in the late 90s and, even if it could be used within a PAR process (Reardon, 1998), it often replicates the 'consultancy model' but within the classroom; c) is the trickiest one, since it is often driven by an authentic participatory ethos and rigorous collaborative methodologies in the name of knowledge democratization, yet seldom includes action-oriented outcomes or explicitly emancipatory practices like the ones labelled in Italy as *conricerca* (Alquati, 1975; De Nicola, 2022). What researchers might not take into account is the fact that co-research means asking residents, leaders, stakeholders, and/or volunteers to spend their time to do something that – if not explicitly related to emancipatory storytelling or concrete actions – *is in* the researchers' only interest. From this perspective, co-research risks being even more extractive than standard social science approaches. Overall, the contemporary institutional interest in these types of activities usually corresponds to a focus on 'the count' of people reached – as much as marketing experts

count the number of people reached by their communication strategies – rather than the reasons and the consequences of that engagement. Thus far, there are very few 'third mission' activities in Italy (see Cellamare *et al.,* 2022 and Cognetti and Laino, 2025 for a good overview) that are tied to an explicit commitment to social change. Beside the risk of confusing PAR with other types of engaged scholarship, the largest obstacle of all is the current shrinking of opportunities for researchers to inhabit their institutional spaces with independence and creativity compared to the past. Today, the engaged work is being scrutinized, the direct contact between researchers and the outside is being 'monitored and evaluated', and university officials are becoming eager to participate not only in 'prestigious academic conferences' but also in every single event with potential high social media visibility. This implies that political content, shared via flyers or social media posts, or adversarial attitudes by community partners during a meeting with movers and shakers, which are both very likely to occur during a PAR process, are harder to handle. While, as previously discussed, these limitations have always characterized the practice of engaged scholarship (Goldsmith, 1998), they are becoming increasingly more evident within the neoliberal university model. Today, a decline of unconditional public funds corresponds to an increase in external funding that comes from grants with many strings attached, or from local sources, implying tighter economic and political relationships with local power structures. The fact that faculty's working hours are counted in timesheets connected to 'funding sources' and that university resources, like university meeting rooms or libraries, are all subject to university rental policies, makes the work of a non-for- profit community-university partnership way more difficult.

PAR facing the weakening of Civic and State institutions

Unfortunately, the university is not the only node of the PAR system facing significant challenges in the contemporary conjuncture. The rise of the neoliberal university paradigm is not an isolated phenomenon but rather a symptom of a much broader trend also impacting the movers and shakers as well as civil society.

The rise of the Neoliberal State (Harvey, 2007) in the old European social-democracies has arrived through the widespread application of austerity policies, reforms of constitutional laws

advancing the privatization of the traditionally strong European welfare States, and the increase of public investments based on mechanisms that put in competition regions and cities (see van Apeldoorn *et al.*, 2008; Blyth, 2013 among many others). From the perspective of those involved in a PAR process, the overall erosion of public authorities' decision-making and spending power, at the advantage of interests increasingly located at a significant distance from the local level (national state, EU authorities, financial markets, international corporations, etc.), represents a major obstacle. It means trying to enter a control room from which you have been left out for a long time, just to find out that the room has been emptied of all its buttons. Even though my work has been carried out in Sicily –a region long regarded as lagging behind due to fragile civic and state institutions and an overall weak business ecosystem— over the years, I have had numerous opportunities to meet and collaborate with highly capable civic leaders, administrators, and local entrepreneurs eager to use participatory action research (PAR) to make a difference in their communities.

These opportunities, however, are decreasing significantly. Like their counterparts in more 'developed' regions of Italy, most Sicilian administrators have embraced neoliberal rhetoric and are actively engaged in removing red tape to attract financial and real estate investments. Yet, unlike those regions, the persistent economic depression in Sicily makes this commitment to deregulation appear even more justified – and often more aggressive.

Those who resist this cultural attitude have less energy and interest in engaging the local political discourse. Many are rushing non-sense PNRR projects, under the fear of "losing the only opportunity to do something that we might have for a long time" (words of a public official of a Sicilian inner-city area), while dealing with their understaffed technical departments, often operated by employees with no higher education than a secondary school diploma. While, for some, this might be due to the lack of vision and coordination on the part of the public authorities, I know several talented administrators whose visions fade in the face of looming deadlines or ministerial threats to cut off funding.

From its side, the civic node has also evolved significantly, well beyond the changes in individual behaviours causing social isolation

discussed by Putnam in the early 2000s (Putnam, 2001). The rise of the neoliberal society blurs the political dimension of residents, privileging instead their economic identity as consumers, not only at the individual level, but also at the collective one. Scholars have repeatedly discussed the decay of Western democracies and the disappearance of XIX and XX century traditional intermediate institutions that used to operate at the national scale but with strong ties with the local dimensions – like mass parties and workers' unions (Mair, 2013). There is a lack of organizations that are conveying the voices and the interests of the powerless to the contemporary political arena. Some have looked with interest and hopes at contemporary social movements and uprisings (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014; Della Porta and Diani, 2020), but they are not necessarily a valid alternative to XX century political organizations both in terms of stability and representativeness (Esposito, 2021). Moreover, the contraction of the welfare state corresponds to an increase in the flow of resources toward those organized forms of civil society – nonprofit organizations – that are equipped to enter the field of social service provision, without guaranteeing the same comprehensiveness, continuity, and labour protections that were once ensured by the public sector. Social scientists have pointed out the evidence that neoliberal governance reshapes the once political role of civil society, turning non-state actors and community organizations into instruments of self-regulation and outsourced responsibility for welfare and service provision. It is a push to the 'social' reconfiguration through market logics and the outsourcing of state functions to NGOs, charities, and local associations (Rose, 1996).

Within these general trends, from a local perspective, I have witnessed how talented young leaders, genuinely committed to the common good, are easily captivated by the 'nonprofit dream'. Driven by the illusion that it is possible to build a grassroots organization that simultaneously generates income and benefits to the community, individuals who might once have become union leaders or political figures are now engaging in the game of social entrepreneurship. Unfortunately, the illusion of this moral version of neoliberalism (Muehlebach, 2012) keeps them distant from – and prevents them from engaging in – any form of political action that challenges the very power structures on which they are economically dependent due to service contracts, locally

funded projects, and the like. I have learned, the hard way, that when it comes to social conflict and protest, non-profits will leave the battlefield, privileging their organizational economic survival. There are, of course, exceptions: cities and regions are full of 'groups' and associations that are not necessarily constrained by budgets and still retain the characteristics of grassroots commitment (Della Porta, 2004). Based on my experience, however, the type of groups studied by Della Porta is increasingly fading, largely due to the aging of their members. New groups are emerging, but with very different characteristics.

The most numerous are often led by individual leaders motivated more by personal fulfillment than by political convictions, and are typically committed to very narrow causes – such as pressuring local administrators to repair a single neighbourhood facility. These groups often show little interest in broader ideas or actions related to social change.

By contrast, the few groups that are driven by political values such as social or climate justice are usually initiated and animated either by senior activists with a history of political engagement who need a committee to channel their expertise, or by very young and highly ideologized individuals, often inspired by political ideologies rooted in self-organization and autonomy from state power.

Both of these politically driven types of civic groups tend to have very few members and limited social reach. As a result, when they engage with representatives of governing bodies, they often end up speaking on behalf of entire neighbourhoods or towns without the legitimacy of a broad popular base.

The convergence of all these dilemmas leads to questioning the old PAR schema, based on well-intentioned researchers, inhabiting their institutions with creativity for the purpose of partnering with civic organizations willing to use research to figure out how to impact movers and shakers. This schema enters into crisis in the face of a contemporary socio-political and institutional conjuncture characterized by a diminished likelihood of encountering suitable civic partners, growing obstacles for academics who seek to engage in research for social change rather than for marketing or knowledge exploitation, and an increasing distance between the local dimension and the actual centers of decision-making. The question we need to ask is whether participatory action

researchers should simply give up, or whether adjustments – both conceptual and practical – can be made to the existing schema (see Figure 3).

Future prospects

How should participatory action research (PAR) be reconceptualized within the neoliberal university, given the fragility of civil society and local public institutions?
This is a pressing research question that emerges from recent PAR experiences, particularly those that have made contemporary obstacles starkly visible. One possible direction is to shift the focus of PAR toward grappling with the limitations of each of the classic nodes in the PAR framework – the university, the decision-making body, and the civic organization—and to make this the central objective of the action-research process itself. Such a reorientation would emphasize the specific learning processes that could potentially affect each of these actors. While this does not yet constitute a fully articulated agenda, it suggests a change in orientation with significant practical implications.

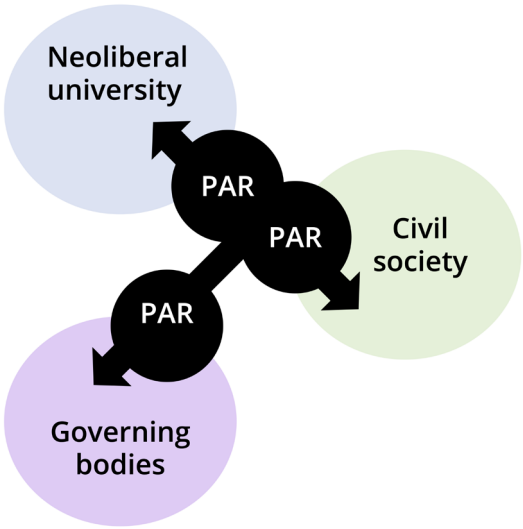

Fig. 3 – A proposed reconceptualization of the PAR system (author's elaboration).

Within our own university, as action-researchers, we might continue to inhabit the *undercommons* (Harney and Moten, 2013)

but with greater emphasis on how to challenge the current shift from the university as an institution devoted to uplifting society as a whole—an ideal that underpinned the post–World War II reforms in favor of mass higher education—to today's conception of universities as elite institutions grounded in meritocracy.
In relation to local governing bodies, action-researchers can certainly keep the old 'adversarial' repertoire inherited from the XX century politics, but making sure it is complemented by tools for supporting institutional learning, maintaining the skill to use the whole spectrum not to fall into the post-political trap (Wilson and Swyngedouw, 2014). This means that our purpose may become not only to influence decision-making through civic demands, but, more importantly, to ensure that such demands hold public institutions accountable and that these institutions possess both the political will and the means to reclaim, at all levels, their responsibility for safeguarding positive rights and public services.
Last, but not least, in engaging with potential civic partners, we might learn to be more selective about with whom we invest our time and energy—prioritizing groups that demonstrate a self-reflexive attitude and a genuine commitment to advancing social change, stand political controversies on the basis of real popular representativeness, playing the role of institutional watchdogs rather than autonomous socio-economic entities or political niches.
Overall, this means scrutinizing many elements of the traditional PAR repertoire, for instance, always asking what turns a self-organized clean-up or a DIY intervention— be it a children's playground or urban furniture— into more than just a substitute for institutional neglect, instead the starting point of a broader process of social transformation with increasingly significant impacts.

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